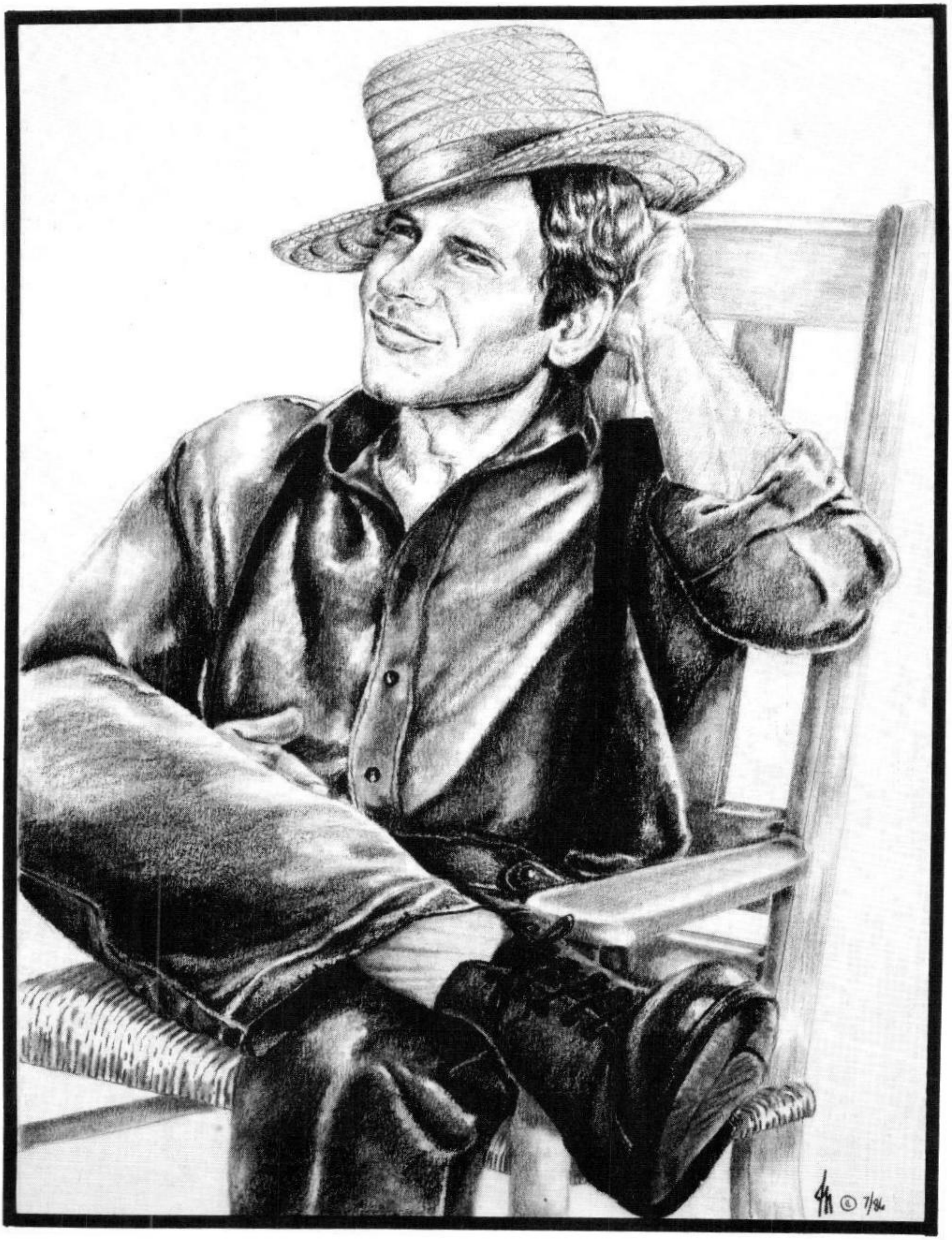
FLIP OF A COIN



18-
U24

Lybarger '83

Flip of a Coin

11

Page

Cartoon by Yvonne Zan 2
Hello! 3
Reviews 4
Guidelines for Submissions 15
Deadline for FLIP OF A COIN 12 15
Back from Vacation by Jacqueline Taero *(Indiana Jones)* 16
  Illustrated by Jim Markle
Confrontation by Elaine Christiani *(Han Solo)* 18
  Illustrated by Rebecca Carey
Police Story by Cypher *(John Book)* 21
Blind Alley by Tonya Cox *(Allie Fox)* 22
  Illustrated by Sheila Paulson
The Debt by Sally A. Syrjala *(Han Solo)* 24
  Illustrated by Dani
Say What? by Cypher *(Various characters)* 27
Angel of Mercy by Jean Marie Dewey *(Indiana Jones)* 28
  Illustrated by Rebecca Carey
Escape! by Beth M. Lentz *(Rick Deckard)* 62
Mosquitia by Debra Edwards *(Allie Fox)* 64
  Illustrated by Dianne Smith
The Other Side of the Jump by Beth C. Masterson *(Han Solo)* 66
  Illustrated by Jim Markle
To Sleep! Perchance to Dream by Michelle Worley *(Indiana Jones)* 71
  Illustrated by Cherie Fontyn
Carbonite Enlightenment by Marci Erwin *(Han Solo)* 78
Evening on the Wind by Elaine Christiani *(Indiana Jones)* 79
  Illustrated by Julie B. Jones
Return of the Corellian by Jacqueline Taero *(Han Solo)* 82
Etchings in a Child's Eye by Jacqueline Taero *(Allie Fox)* 83
  Illustrated by Rebecca Carey
Winter Dreams by Tracy Taylor *(Han Solo)* 84
  Illustrated by Judy Low
Resume by Cypher *(Rick Deckard)* 90
Gold by Martie O'Brien *(Allie Fox)* 91
  Illustrated by Wanda Lybarger
First Lesson by Marcia Brin *(Han Solo)* 103
  Illustrated by Dani
Singapore Sling by Barbara Anderson *(Indiana Jones)* 115
  Illustrated by Jim Markle
Silent Sol(o)iloquy by Jill Thomas *(Han Solo)* 162
Curtain Call by L. A. Adolf *(Han Solo)* 163
  Illustrated by Yvonne Zan

My Dearest John by Christine Haire *(John Book)* 176
A Tommy Tale - Part 1 by Wanda Lybarger *(Tommy Lillard)* 177
Illustrated by Wanda Lybarger and Martynn
Save Us From Princesses by Ruth Radecki *(Han Solo)* 221
Illustrated by Dani
Fireside Soliloquy by Elaine Christiani *(Tommy Lillard)* 252
Indiana Wants Me by Jeanna Falk *(Indiana Jones)* 253
Thoughts to the Dripping of Rain by Jacqueline Taero *(Rick Deckard)* 254
Illustrated by Lisa Brown
Bill of Fare by Elaine Christiani *(Indiana Jones)* 256
Illustrated by Dani
How Do You Tell A Friend? by Susan Zahn *(Han Solo)* 259
The Parting by Jacqueline Taero *(Tommy Lillard)* 260
Illustrated by Jim Markle
Ever Had One of Those Days...? by Jill Thomas *(Indiana Jones)* 262
Lethal Witness by Cypher *(John Book)* 264
Illustrated by Dani
Willie Scott's Restaurant Review by Jacqueline Taero *(Indiana Jones)* 304
Notices 305

Front Cover: Jim Markle
Back Cover: Dianne Smith
Inside Back Cover: Cherie Fontyn
Proofreaders: Anne Womack, Loretta Lewis
Printed by Storter Printing Company, Gainesville, Florida

FLIP OF A COIN is a non-profit, amateur publication by © ~~TWO~~ Three Sons & A Brother Press; Paula Truelove and Jenny McAdams, Editors, 502 McKeithan Street, #4A, Tallahassee, Florida 32304. This zine may not be reproduced in any manner without written consent of the writers, artists, and editors. It is not the intention of this publication to infringe upon the copyrights of any television or film production from which these fannish works are derived. November 1987.

I don't care if it's cute
—I just don't trust it!
eek
ARK
INC.

HELLO !

The holidays are here and so is FLIP 11! Here's hoping this issue will contribute to the joy and fun of this very special season. Within these covers, you will find plenty of action by Han and Indy and several other Ford characters as well as an exciting cross-universe adventure with John Book and Martin Riggs, beautifully illustrated by Dani. So curl up next to a nice cozy fire, grab a cup of hot chocolate, and dig in!

FLIP 12 is already in the planning stages with several great stories already accepted but there's still room for more. We're especially hoping to receive some material on some of Harrison's lesser known characters. Anybody got a Barnsby in the works? How about Hobey?

We do have a special treat for everyone planned for the next issue. Under "The Classics" series, Sherry Magee is allowing us to run her "Halloween Tales" and "Ghost Hunt" companion pieces, which appeared several years ago in another zine. These are "vintage Kenny Boyd" and are a must for every Ford Fan's library.

This spring we'll be looking forward to FRANTIC in the theaters. From what was recently said in an interview with Jim Brown on the TODAY SHOW, Harrison will be portraying a cardiologist at a medical convention in Paris, whose wife is kidnapped. Sketchy plot line, but intriguing. We'd like to once again wish Harrison great success with his new role and hope it brings him continued critical acclaim. (An Academy Award would be nice, too!)

We do have an apology to make to Carolyn Golledge for misspelling her name in FLIP 11--throughout the entire issue. While we might win points for consistency, we're truly embarrassed and sincerely appreciate Carolyn's understanding and sense of humor. Thanks, Carolyn; that means a lot!

We would also like to pay tribute to a dear friend of ours, Anne Womack, who has moved from Tallahassee to start a new life in Virginia. FLIP has many times been complimented on the infrequency of typographical errors and Anne is a large reason for that. (If a typo slips by her eagle eyes, it is meant to be there!) From the beginning, she has devoted many, many hours to proofing everything for FLIP and is an invaluable member of FLIP's team of contributors. Fortunately, she has agreed to continue proofing for us, via the US Postal Service.

Anne, you are a beautiful person and we miss you terribly. Best of luck in your new venture, and...this one's for you!

Take care, everybody, best wishes, and have a happy, safe holiday season!

Jenny and Paula

REVIEWS

Liz Gregory, Rindge, New Hampshire

Firstly, I wish to express my admiration and gratitude for the fabulous illo which Yvonne Zan created to accompany my Indiana Jones free verse. And issue 10, with its extraordinary, impressive covers, was a delight to the eyes. (Have you people entertained the idea of becoming pro?)

As always, the zine provided excellent fare from every source of Harrison's roles. Predictably, I favored the Indy pieces. Dianne Smith's illustrations were breathtaking! What talent you've amassed into yet another (I'm sure) award-winning issue. Continued success!

Elaine Christiani, Orlando, Florida

Yes, yes, yes--FLIP 10 got here and was devoured. At last, Mark Blackwood makes his appearance!

My favorite this time around was "Medicine Show"--nice to have Nova and Phloth back. Cypher is a master (mistress?) at creating a STAR WARS atmosphere, right down to customs, clothes and terminology. This is a standard I hope to attain. And Wanda provided the funniest art she's drawn yet--when I saw Fa-Ples, I laughed so hard I cramped. A beautiful job all around.

Also loved "The Question"--the last lines are a jolt. Makes you read them over and over again. Dani's illo is wonderful and it's my favorite shot from the film.

I love the way "Somewhere In Kansas" looks. Kate looks wonderfully evil! All my stuff looks sooo good. Thanks much!

Can't wait for number 11, to see if anyone's done any Allie Fox fiction. The man's infuriating to write!

Shani Moore, Sylacauga, Alabama

I've just finished FLIP 10 and wanted to send you a note while it was fresh on my mind. I couldn't believe that gorgeous cover! I found myself stopping every few pages to go back and gaze at that gorgeous drawing. Wanda outdid herself on this one. This was the first colored cover that I've seen, and I love it. Hope this will become a regular in all future issues. Also loved Martynn's back cover. Beautiful.

And, yes, I finally did get past the covers to the contents inside. As usual, I was not disappointed. The poetry, the artwork, the cartoons, and the stories were all up to your usual high standards, and I thoroughly enjoyed each and every piece. I especially loved Jeanna Falk's "The Last Telephone Conversation Between David Halloran and Margaret Sellinger." Except for Han Solo, I think David is my favorite Ford character, and I always enjoy finding well written pieces about him.

My favorite story in the whole zine, though, has to be Carolyn Golledge's "A New Meaning." Her continuation of Rachel's and John's story was very believable, and the ending was so very much more satisfying than the ending of the movie. I've always felt that there should have been something more, and Carolyn very ably provided that 'something more.'

Note? I did say note, didn't I? Anyway, just wanted to thank you and Jenny for another terrific zine. Looking forward to FLIP 11.

Laura Thomas, Rochester, New York

This is just a quick note to say congratulations on FLIP 10! It is a really good issue, starting with the cover, which was gorgeous. All the artwork was exceptionally good. Wanda Lybarger is always excellent; so are Dani and Jim Markle. Dianne Smith does beautiful work--too bad those weren't in color, but I know how expensive that is.

I enjoyed all the stories; my only complaint, if you can call it that, is that more characters weren't represented. The focus was definitely on Han, Indy, Tommy, and John. However, I expect that these are everybody's favorites, after all. They are mine so I shouldn't gripe about it. There were some nice (though brief) pieces on Rick, Kenny, Allie, etc. I'd really like to see another long Kenny Boyd story, though, as you've had some great ones in past issues.

This time around, I liked "The Good Woman" by Cypher, and "Luck" by Karen Ripley. Trust Karen to figure out a way to combine Tommy and Paden! Barbara Anderson's "Tripping the Light Fantastic" was delightful, while Robin White's "Day of the Gladius" had not one but two of my heroes--Indiana Jones and Robin Hood. Wow!

I don't even know what to say about "A New Meaning" by Carolyn Golledge. Let's just say I lost sleep over that one. I started reading it rather late at night and once started, I certainly couldn't put it down. So I ended up by being very tired at work the next day, but it was well worth it. Carolyn just gets better and better all the time.

Anyway, I think you have both outdone yourselves, ladies. A really fine anniversary issue. Can you believe this is number ten? I can't! Take care and have a nice spring and summer--have to keep your strength up for number eleven!

Joan Ludlow, Madison Heights, Michigan

Your special issue was indeed very special. When I pulled out my copy of FLIP 10, I had to catch my breath. The color covers were truly breath-taking. What a treat from Wanda and Martynn!

The inside was so good, too. I haven't space to mention everything, but I did enjoy it all. First of all, thanks to Cypher for another very entertaining chapter in the saga of Nova and Phloth. I do so enjoy the fact that Solo genuinely likes this woman who is no beauty queen and no light-weight. I like her, too. "The Medicine Show" was so funny, and I appreciated the fact that Fa-Ples was just a poor guy trying to do his job--and Han realized it, too. Please, please, Cypher, write more in this series. These stories are such fun to read.

"Somewhere In Kansas" was appropriately chilling, made even more so by the author's note. I will admit I had a suspicion of Kate all along because, somehow, she reminded me of an equally unpleasant couple I read about in a Louis L'Amour western. A frightening and effective story, this was. Well done.

Once again, the classic *("Tripping the Light Fantastic" by Barbara Anderson)* was a story I had never read and was glad to have the chance of reading it. It was very good--well written and very suspenseful.

I enjoyed "The Pure Faith" by T. S. Weddell because I loved the character study of Indy. His realization of why his motives for "grave-robbing" were important was brought out very believably.

Finally, I think you know I must select Carolyn Golledge's "A New Meaning" as the best piece in FLIP 10. I've been hearing good things about this author's work lately, and this story illustrates why. The writing is very good, the characterization is equally good. I loved having Daniel in the story, and I loved the way Book's interaction with him and Eli gave them doubts about their lives just as their interaction with Book made him question his own life. And neither the Amish nor the 'English' were 'right.' Both viewpoints were valid and true. I appreciated the fact that the moral dilemma had no easy answers. Really a very fine story, one that would surely make it into a "Best of FLIP..." issue. I hope to see more of this author in the future.

Another fine issue, ladies. Everything was good, but those covers were truly special. I must also single out Dianne Smith's Indy on page 109 as a truly beautiful piece of art. This lady is a find! Thank you, ladies, for an exceptional issue of FLIP. Now, how are you going to top this?! Well, I expect you'll think of something--and I'll continue to be around to enjoy the surprises. Thanks!

Robin White, Marysville, Washington

Cover - pant, pant. "The Good Woman" - Aw, shucks! Captured Tommy Lillard's character to a "T". (By the way, have you ever noticed in the credits to FRISCO KID, that the person's name who plays the sheriff is really Tommy Lillard?) "American Dream" - Excellent. I would enjoy hearing this set to music as I'm sure Martie must have done. "Somewhere In Kansas" - Wouldn't this make a nice episode for television? TWILIGHT ZONE or THRILLER, maybe. Exciting, cliff-hanging, slam-banger! Inside back cover - Tee hee!!

"Tripping the Light Fantastic" - Another good Solo story. Held my attention, good characterization. Something lacking, though can't quite put my finger on it. I think it moved too fast and I had trouble keeping up. Maybe I was just tired. Nice artwork, Jim.

"The Medicine Show" - This one had just enough seriousness to make it work. It had the light touch that Brian Daley put into his novels. I haven't read anything by Cypher yet that I didn't enjoy. Glad to see she/he does long pieces as well as devastating poetry. Nice illustration, Wanda; too bad Han couldn't have turned a little.

"Luck" - Another good Tommy story. Of course, I had the sheriff figured from the beginning. The ending was predictable, sort of like a Disney movie, but the moral was there (sort of like Disney). Sometimes we all deserve that last chance that keeps us straight. I'm glad Tommy'd grown enough to realize it.

"A New Meaning" - My choice for 'Best of the Zine.' I've only seen WITNESS about four times (for shame!). This one is so in character for John Book that I found myself visualizing it on the screen. Carolyn has taken the obvious ending that all the fans saw and written it the way it should have been written. Just enough emphasis on the romance between John and Rachel, but more on the character of John Book himself, all sides of him. The narrative passages with the Amish people were beautifully done, not patronizing as so easily could have happened, but a glimpse of a proud people. It really reminds me so much of the opening sequences of the movie, where you almost hate to see the world of today intrude into the peace and tranquillity of the fields.

Lin Ward, Richmond, Virginia

FLIP 10 is absolutely beautiful, inside and out! The color cover is fantastic! The stories, poems, and artwork maintain your high standards. Everything was delectable!

Cypher's "The Good Woman" is a delightful little romance. I love to read stories about Tommy trying to adapt to honest living, and his character (as well as all the others) rang true in this story. Shucks, Elizabeth would've been a good match for him, too. The outhouse incident was hilarious! Not at all my usual line of thought about Ford!

"American Dream" was deeply moving. I've reread it several times, and would love to hear Martie sing it. "Revelation" was well-written and intriguing, despite the fact that I'm unfamiliar with the film. "Somewhere In Kansas" is a shocking, tantalizing story--what an ending!

"Tripping the Light Fantastic" is a finely-crafted tale, well worth a reprint (and a reread!), and is enhanced by Jim Markle's creative illos, especially page 71; I'd had trouble visualizing the alien. Han's expression, and the angle of his body are very well realized, and the unusual position of the blaster, pointing into the picture is very imaginative. I must confess that I loved the "garbage disposal" scene in this story! Zira was such a poisonous villain (Ouch! Sorry.)

As a big ROBIN OF SHERWOOD fan, I was thrilled to see "Day of the Gladius." What a fun time travel idea, what with two of my favorite characters meeting; it's just too much! The illo on page 83 gave me a thrill! Let's do it again! *grin*

It's fun to see another adventure with Han and Nova ("The Medicine Show") and I just love that stuffy Phloth. Hilarious idea to make him related to the fungus that caused the mange, and to give said fungus a name! Wanda's illo on page 143 is devine!

"Luck" is a wonderful, imaginative, satisfying story. I love to visualize Tommy's life smoothing out like that. "The Pure Faith"is a thought-provoking, and insightful story about the kind of experience that may have turned Indy into a collector of museum pieces.

Carolyn Golledge's "A New Meaning" is absolutely primo! The characterization, plot, and imagery were so evocative that I feel as if I've seen the sequel to WITNESS. Engrossing, heart-warming, and ultimately satisfying. Before reading this story, I'd never have believed that Rachel and John could make a successful match, but now I believe it! Dani's illos, as always, compellingly convey mood and ambiance, especially those on Pages 215 and 245.

Pat Nussman's "Insider" is an exquisite poem, as are all of Taero's, especially "Farewell to Samuel." What a heart-wringer! "Fly Like the Wind" by Chris Haire makes me feel as if I'm off on the *Falcon*--whee! All the artwork is lovely, but Nancy Miller's Indy on page 40 and Dianne Smith's pieces come to mind, as well as those previously mentioned.

Rebecca Carey, Lusby, Maryland

This tenth issue of FLIP is so striking with its covers in color! Wanda has engineered a real eye-catcher, and the atmospheric quality of Martynn's back cover makes a nice contrast with its softness. It's good to see a wide variety of illustrators represented in the body of the zine. The more the merrier!

I've never sent an LOC before, but their value was discussed and lack thereof lamented at MediaWest, so here goes.

I've noticed in all zines that the art is mostly mentioned in a passing manner, while the writing is discussed in greater detail; so, being an artist and not a writer, I thought I'd try to fill the gap a bit and deal only with the art. I know I've appreciated most the comments on my work that give specific reasons for the nod. It's quite useful to me to see what I've done through other people's eyes, and I would guess that other artists might feel the same.

By the bye, I hope no one, artist or reader, will feel that by making technical commentary, I'm playing "authority" or being high-handed. I've had the experience that "critique" is sometimes misinterpreted by people who haven't lived through years of it themselves. For me, it's been a shortcut for weeding out my garbage and recognizing for re-use the good points of my work, and was absolutely the most invaluable thing I learned at school. But mine is by no means the final word, and I welcome differing opinions via LOC or letter. I do promise to keep it positive unless I get word from individual artists that they'd like to hear both sides of the comment.

The following are the things I felt were particularly successful in this issue, and why.

Kudos to Jim Markle for the nicely uncontrived look of the Tommy on page 32. The strong point-of-view is visually more important an element than the nudity and so keeps it from being gratuitous to begin with, and the natural body gesture caused by the held bucket and the glance upward combine to produce a modest position that isn't immediately obvious as one more "knee-in-the-way" shot.

Wanda's Kenny on 34 is a good example of how asymmetry and negative space can be put to powerful use in a drawing. The same two things, plus contrast, apply to Dani's Book on 187. Also, the perpendicular-to-the-viewer positioning of the figure and its twisting glance out and away from the surface of the page prevent the high-contrast graphic from overly flattening the space.

J. B. Jones' portrait of Harrison on page 13 shows how a photo can be turned into a drawing that stands on its own merit. Uncluttered, unpretentious, it's full of subtle draftsmanly details that play counterpoint to the overall appearance of simplicity. Note the fine-tooth pencil strokes in hair, lower lip, and magnified into pattern in the shirt; then a rougher tooth (charcoal?) for some of the shading; then the very smooth pencil smudging of the skin surface that reads almost as if it were an ink wash; the dark darks that stay put and do their job instead of, as is usual when found in a light piece, jumping out at you; and, finally, the nicely controlled outline that comes forward when needed and fades back where it would get in the way of form created by tone and highlight. And none of these disparate types of "mark" get in the way of or overpower any other. It all hangs together beautifully and looks like work done in "portraiture class." It takes into consideration and makes interesting use of the medium in which it's done rather than getting so tight and precious about infinitesimal accuracy that all one ends up seeing are the "right" parts and the "wrong" parts. Visually interesting and nicely balanced, this one achieves drawinghood.

"And now for my next pronouncement...!" (I'm sorry. I just can't seem to express myself succinctly without sounding like God. Guess it's why serious artists are frequently seen as snobs. A hazard of the trade, I suppose.)

I'd like to thank all for the nice words about the FLIP 9 covers. The actual idea (the reversal) was my roommate's, but the drawing itself is one of the few with which I'm 99% satisfied, so I'm glad others liked it too. (Elaine, thanks! The "future" reference was intentional and I'd hoped it was clear enough to pick up on. I'm not always successful at adding extra layers of meaning to the gestalt of a piece, but I try.)

Well, I have run on more than long enough, so clear skies 'til next ish.

Cheree Cargill, Garland, Texas

I've been trying to get enough time to sit down and do an LOC on FLIP 10, but the baby hasn't been cooperating. Every time I get her settled and sit down, she wakes up. So, I guess I'll have to do this in bits and pieces. If this letter sounds a bit disjointed, that's why.

First, the color covers were really nice. I just wish that Martynn's had come out better. ***(That wasn't a problem with the printing. Martynn did her drawing in colored pencils so we assume that that is the look she wished to achieve.)*** As usual, the art throughout was first class. Good to see so much of Jim Markle's work.

"The Good Woman" was a very enjoyable Tommy tale. Cypher writes wonderfully well-thought-out stories and this was no exception. That final scene had me howling!

So good to see Martie still in form with "American Dream." A very haunting poem.

"Revelation" was very well-written and it was a pleasure to see something done with one of Harrison's more obscure characters, Mark Blackwood.

"Somewhere in Kansas" was one of the best stories in the zine. What started out as a typical Tommy-and-the-girl story turned into a real hair-raiser!

I am really enjoying your "Classics" series and "Tripping the Light Fantastic" was no exception. Barbara Anderson is another one of fandom's best writers. Very good story.

"Day of the Gladius" was a nice fantasy/Indy tale. Good cross-universe with the Robin Hood people. Wish it had had a more powerful ending, though. By the way, in case anyone doesn't know, I'll let the cat out of the bag. Friar Tuck in the illo on page 99 is Jim Markle. He's a member of the local Robin Hood fan group and plays a really marvelous Tuck! Hi, Jim!

Cypher did it again with "The Medicine Show." I dearly love her Han stories and Nova is one of the best fan-created characters to come along in years. Although she bears a striking resemblance in some ways to Cypher, she's far from a Mary Sue. She's a lovely, lusty lady who can hold her own. I keep trying to twist Cypher's arm into sending a Nova story my way!

"Luck" was a nicely done story, but I'm afraid I didn't understand the final paragraph. Am I hopelessly fuddled? Who is "Paden"? *(Paden was the character played by Kevin Kline in SILVERADO.)*

"The Pure Faith" was a powerful little story, but then T. S. Weddell writes no other kind that I've ever read. I really liked the character of Maggie. Weddell is one of the few writers in fandom who pairs Han or Indy or whoever with an older woman as an equal partner. Nice to see a partner who is not necessarily a romantic partner. Her stories are always well researched and realistic.

Finally, there is "A New Meaning" by Carolyn Golledge. This is without a doubt the best story Carolyn has ever written! It is also the best WITNESS story I've ever read! This is one of those quintessential fan stories that should be taken as gospel in relation to sequels or filling in missing parts of the story. Beautifully written and plotted. My only quibble was that I kept expecting the killers to make one final attempt on John's life. Perhaps Carolyn will consider a sequel to this story?? Hmmm, Carolyn??

I want to say one final thing, directed at both you, Paula, and Jenny, in regards to the overall "look" of FLIP, not just this one issue but all ten of them. Your zine is one of the classiest, best done in fandom. This goes beyond excellent stories, poetry and art. As a zine editor myself, I can appreciate the work and care that goes into FLIP. The layout is wonderful and so well done. The graphics are clean, the borders evocative, the art well-placed. You should be very, very proud of FLIP. I gnash my teeth and burn with envy every time a new issue comes out! I aspire to make my own zines as professionally done as FLIP! *(Gosh, Cheree, *blush* Thank you very, very much! And congratulations on the birth of your daughter, as well as your new Harrison Ford zine, CHOICE PARTS! You have provided Ford Fans with an additional source of excellent fan fiction, poetry and art, and we're looking forward to the second edition! Thank you for that and best of luck!)*

Barbara Anderson, Fairlawn, New Jersey

FLIP 10..."It's perfection, that's what it is." From cover to cover, and I mean that literally, your tenth anniversary issue is sheer, utter perfection. Allie would approve of this issue. Wanda's cover art is just beautiful, the eyes in that shot follow you just like his would and it's almost three-dimensional. The more I stared at it, the more it seemed to come alive and the more steam started to come out from around my collar. A true Lybarger masterpiece. Martynn's back cover was excellent as well...a very haunting portrayal. Haunting...just like the man.

Before I LOC the contributors, Jenny and Paula, take your well deserved bows and accept the earned compliments and feel justifiably proud for another beautiful tribute to Harrison. Again, the zine's quality speaks for itself on sight alone. Love the title on the spine...classy little touch. Going to be great when I go to look for a back issue to re-read. But the artwork is crisp, nary a typo to be found; the layout of poetry, short stories, etc., lends so much to the enjoyment of the zine. Even the little finishing designs that enclose a poem or signal the end of a story or separate two pieces make all the difference between mundane and wonderful, between average and superb. Thank you, editors, for all the obvious time, effort and love that are in these pages. Harrison will be impressed with this one, too!

The best story in here is without question Golledge's "A New Meaning." Fantastic story. Very well written, obviously extensively researched. I actually sat on my livingroom floor and cried when Schaeffer died in Book's arms. It was shocking, gritty, realistic, warm, erotic, satisfying...and I could go on and on with the superlatives. I would go far as to say that it is the best thing she has ever written and will have to work very hard to surpass herself...but I think she will. Sort of like Harrison. We always think, "How can he possibly be better?" and he always is.

Jacqueline Taero was, as usual, a wonderful presence throughout the zine. I enjoy the way you space her work out, instead of bunching it all together in a few pages. It's like a surprise to turn the pages and find her delightful pieces as one reads through the zine. Loved "The Question." I giggled down to my toes.

Cypher was great. "The Good Woman" was a laugh-out-loud romp. Poor Tommy... all this cowboy wants is a little lovin' and what does he get...? "The Medicine Show" was also excellent. I really enjoy Nova and her fungus friend, even a little jealous at the marvelous concept. I enjoy Cypher's descriptions of things, her comparisons and the in-jokes she very cleverly works into the story and dialogue. And, of course, Wanda's illos are without competition. Love the way she portrays this man in "wisps and fancies." I liked the first illo the best in this story, though; that poor woebegone Wookiee, that classic Corellian challenging stance, and that droid which Wanda somehow got to look so officially medical.

A Mark Blackwood piece...this is a first, isn't it? Entirely plausible and a little chilling. Harrison's minor characters are so very neglected so it was nice to see this in there. Maybe it will spark an interest in some of the other small roles. A lot of material and potential back in his contract days.

Chilling, too, was "Somewhere In Kansas" by Elaine Christiani. It was tight, concise, and breath-holding. Found myself chewing on my knuckles when Kate went after Tommy with the knife and had a very clear visual image of him flipping her over to tie her hands. I think Lillard ought to think about taking up celibacy... sex only gets this cowboy into all sorts of trouble! On second thought, it would be a crime to deny the ladies of the West the pleasure of Tommy.

Good filks in this issue. "Bad, Bad Indy Jones" was cute and the Hanover adaptation of "Hello Again" was wonderfully bittersweet.

Two good Indy stories. "The Day of the Gladius," which I wish had been longer, was such a good idea and plot. Had elements of A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT about it. This could perhaps be the start of a series of Indy back in time. Did like the relationship and comraderie between Jones and Marcus. And T. S. Weddell's "The Pure Faith"...she always writes so well. Got a wonderful deep down chuckle with her description of Maggie checking him for appendicitis and appreciating the body as she did so.

And I loved "Luck" by Karen Ripley. She wrote the first few pages of that so skillfully that I couldn't figure out which character was Tommy...the sheriff or the prisoner.

Bits and pieces... "Nocturnal Activities" - very well written--meter and such. It just recites so easily and clever and funny...more Jill Thomas, please. Was nice to see Pat Nussman in here again and she did her usual eloquent work with "Insider."

Guess you could say I loved everything. Jim Markle's artwork throughout was great; memorable "bun" shot reminiscent of the opening of RAIDERS on that last page. Dani's artwork for "A New Meaning" was terrific, especially that last page with Book and Rachel. Beautiful likeness of Book. I also liked her Deckard and Rachel. It was just a fantastic issue, guys, and worthy of a milestone in FLIP's history and future. Though I really don't know how long you can continue with making each zine better than the last. But I guess if Harrison continues to get better and better with each movie and with each year, then FLIP will be right there with him. Am eagerly awaiting FLIP 11 almost as much as his next movie.

Beth Lentz, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Opening FLIP 10 was sweet satisfaction! It almost feels like I've met Harrison after spending a day with an issue. This time, I felt especially so with John Book! The beautiful color covers by Wanda and Martynn made this issue as singular as the man who inspires all this proliferation!

I am delighted with the news of Harrison and Melissa's son! By the time the next issue is out, he may be over a year old, so I hope we'll know by then how Melissa's doing and the baby. I understand their need for privacy but can't help being concerned and worried and such. I hope Harrison doesn't become too much a stay-at-home with the baby that he won't take on as many projects for us to write about, but as long as he's happy, I'm sure we will be. Melissa is one lucky lady!

I can't list everybody's work in FLIP 10 but I enjoyed everything and will try to comment on most of it without taking too much space. Jacqueline Taero had many nice poems. I loved "The Magic Shirt"...something that's fascinated a lot of fans. I always looked on "the shirt" as his HF costume, until he took to wearing tweeds and such! Her "Sufficient Unto the Day..." sounded just like Han. Loved Dianne Smith's accompanying artwork of Han! "Just Another Useless Experience"... liked the title taken from Mr. Ford's own words and Indy's dialogue. "Still Smuggling And Proud of It" made me laugh, especially the surprise ending. He had me believing him, too! I'll have to check into that "land on Dagobah"!

I liked all the Tommy Lillard stories. "Somewhere In Kansas" got a little gruesome, but it did turn into a bad business, so it was justified. I hate to see Tommy get rough. "The Good Woman" was a lot of fun. Once again, only Tommy can rival Solo in the situations he can get himself into! And in front of a jealous husband no less! "Luck" was nice, and interesting seeing Tommy as an older man.

"American Dream" by Martie about Vietnam and Kenny Boyd read like one of those required readings in English Lit. The theme probably wouldn't go over too well politically. Such a shame, since it deserves more play.

"Day of the Gladius" by Robin White, where Indy met Robin and his "merry men," was certainly unique. I wish Marvel Comics could adapt that, if they hadn't given up on poor Indy. At least we haven't.

"The Medicine Show" - another fun Han story. Liked the action and clutsy Nova. Also appreciate Cypher's inveigling Han into such a state of dress (or should that be undress?). Love Wanda's delightful drawing of same on page 142. What wouldn't Han do for Chewie? This is one Corellian who's up to the task! But I'm still curious, just how many women were there on the ruling council? Also liked the ending with Han finally turning the tables on some bill collectors for a change.

"The Pure Faith" by T. S. Weddell was exciting and a nice perspective on the degree of integrity Indy holds in archaeology.

"A New Meaning" by Carolyn Golledge was a real treat and read like the definitive statement on the events that followed WITNESS, and like a sequel I never thought possible. I never thought John and Rachel could or should get back together but Carolyn's story convinced me that not only was it possible and feasible, but, taking the events in her story into consideration, it would even be preferable. I never wanted John to leave the force (police force, that is!) but a carpentry/social worker kind of existence sounds good for him; and John Book, of all people, deserves to have a family and to at least know of a baby he fathered. I think the hardest thing to take about the end of WITNESS is not knowing if Book will ever see Rachel again and know if she was pregnant. I saw WITNESS soon after reading this story and found the relationships depicted in the story fit very well and found myself assuming them for fact. Carolyn wove such a spell I found myself crying right along with John when Schaeffer died. My only regret was for Daniel. I hope he got back with that nurse in the hospital. I'll be reading this one over for years to come! Thank you, Carolyn, and your friend helpers, for such a wonderful story.

The small pieces were all good, too. Jim Markle's inside back cover piece with snake threatening Indy gave me a good laugh! Thanks to all the talented Fordfen out there! As the commercial goes: "You make 'quality Job 1'!"

Irina Ozernoy, San Francisco, California

Well, what can I say? I got FLIP 10 in the mail yesterday and I have been imitating Jello ever since. Adjectives fail me. Thank you, thank you so much!! The issue is truly incredible, and I am so proud of both you and Jenny. I wish Harrison could see this issue because I am sure that he would be as overwhelmed as I am. You both have done such a marvelous job!

It took me at least ten minutes to get past the front cover. My God, it was gorgeous! Those colors are so vivid--and it must have been so expensive to put out. But well worth it. Pant, drool. Sigh. I do wish Harrison could see FLIP 10. Well, at least he's got number 8; but if he could only see... Oh, well.

Adjectives are coming back to me--like "fantastic" and "fabulous." That describes FLIP 10 very accurately. I know I must sound like a gibbering lunatic, but I have to tell you what this issue means to me!

Okay, I've calmed down (a bit) and I am prepared to actually talk about what is inside FLIP 10. First of all, I must thank you and Jenny again for accepting "Revelation." I still can't get over seeing my name in print--and in such beautiful print, too! And Jim Markle's illo was so good!! I think he is such an excellent artist, and he captured Mark's feelings so well.

I know you must be pretty tired of hearing me thank you for this, but it means so much to me. I knew nothing about fandom until FLIP, and never dared to express my, uh, feelings for Harrison and his characters on paper, because I thought it would never amount to anything. But now, with FLIP, (to quote Obi-Wan)I've taken my first steps into a larger universe. So, thank you for giving me that marvelous opportunity and taking a chance on me. Also, Paula, thank you for listening as I went on and on about my writer's blocks, etc., and thank you both so much for all your support.

Well, um, now that I'm actually talking about FLIP on the inside, I'll say that I thought that all the stories were great. (I don't think I'll ever get over my inferiority complex, though--not with writers like Cypher and Barbara Anderson and...) And there was so much great poetry, too! If I mentioned everything I liked, I'd probably break all my records for letter writing, but there are some that I absolutely must mention...

Jacqueline Taero's "The Magic Shirt." Yes, I noticed, too! "All I Ever Wanted" by Kathryn Agel was so sweet--and so true! "American Dream" - Oh, the poignancy of it! "Still Smuggling..." Hee-hee-hee! "Maybe" - Ruth Radecki is such a good poet. I loved this one. It was so, I don't know, Willie. Speaking of Willie, "Noctural Activities(??)" - Cute, really cute.

Oh, wait, I was just thinking about the other poems I liked and I realized I was about to mention just about everything. So I've stopped myself just in time, and I'm sorry I couldn't mention everyone. Cypher, however, deserves a special gold star for her cute little poems and limericks. They were so hysterical, I was rolling around on the floor. An "Allie Fox," indeed!

A lot of Tommy stories in this one--not that I'm complainin', Cuz! "The Good Woman" - Whooeee! Another one of Cypher's hysterical creations! Poor Tommy, he never gets any breaks. Just what was he doing with that donkey? (Never mind.) "Somewhere In Kansas" - Weird story, this one, but I really liked it. Historically accurate, too. Great job! "Luck" - I wasn't sure if this was a cross-universe story or not. Is "Paden" one of Harrison's characters, by any chance? Don't much like the idea of Tommy aging but that's life.

"Tripping the Light Fantastic" - I love the idea of The Classics since it gives people like me the chance to catch up. Damn good stories, too!! I got to the end of this one until I realized that this Bunji was the "Big Bunji" Ploovo Two-Four-One talked about in HAN SOLO AT STARS' END. Great story.

"Day of the Gladius" - Robin Hood, yet? And Baron Rene' d'Belloq? What an idea! And poor Rene'. I'm really rather fond of him, every once in a while.

"The Medicine Show" - Another gold star for Cypher! And kudos for bringing back Nova and Phloth! But poor Chewie..., and poor Han--oh, the trials he had to go through to get those minerals! He should've known better than to go to Rio--oops, I mean Rhio. Hee-hee-hee...

I thought "The Pure Faith" was exceptionally well done. Loved Indy's transformation--ooh, the line, "One wouldn't have to stoop to Belloq's level, of course" sent shivers up and down my spine. Those symptoms of appendicitis really hit the spot, too (so to speak). Don't tell me about it, did that sound familiar! I'm glad all of us have only one appendix.

And, now, last but not least, John Book. "Coming To" - Excellent vignette. "A New Meaning" - Wow, oh wow! Adjectives fail me once again. What a sequel to WITNESS!! I really didn't want this one to end, and tried to ration myself, or read slower. No use. This is the ending to WITNESS. I can't get over this story. I'm going to have to read it again. My praise doesn't do it justice. It totally blew me away. "!!!!!" for "A New Meaning" and Carolyn Golledge.

Well, I did manage to fit most of the table of contents into my letter, and I'm sorry about that. But FLIP 10 deserves much, much more. All the artwork was great--especially Jim Markle (thanks again) and the last cartoon was hilarious.

Almost forgot the back cover. What a great coincidence with Mark Blackwood. Loved it! Thank you once again for bringing FLIP into my life. I am eternally grateful.

GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS TO FLIP OF A COIN

They're fairly simple. All manuscripts should be typed double-spaced, on 8½" x 11" bond paper; poems and filks can be typed single-spaced. We are requesting that you send two copies, one of which will be given to the artist, and that you include a SASE for return of your material if it is not accepted. Fiction can be of any length; if necessary, we're willing to serialize a feature over a couple of issues.

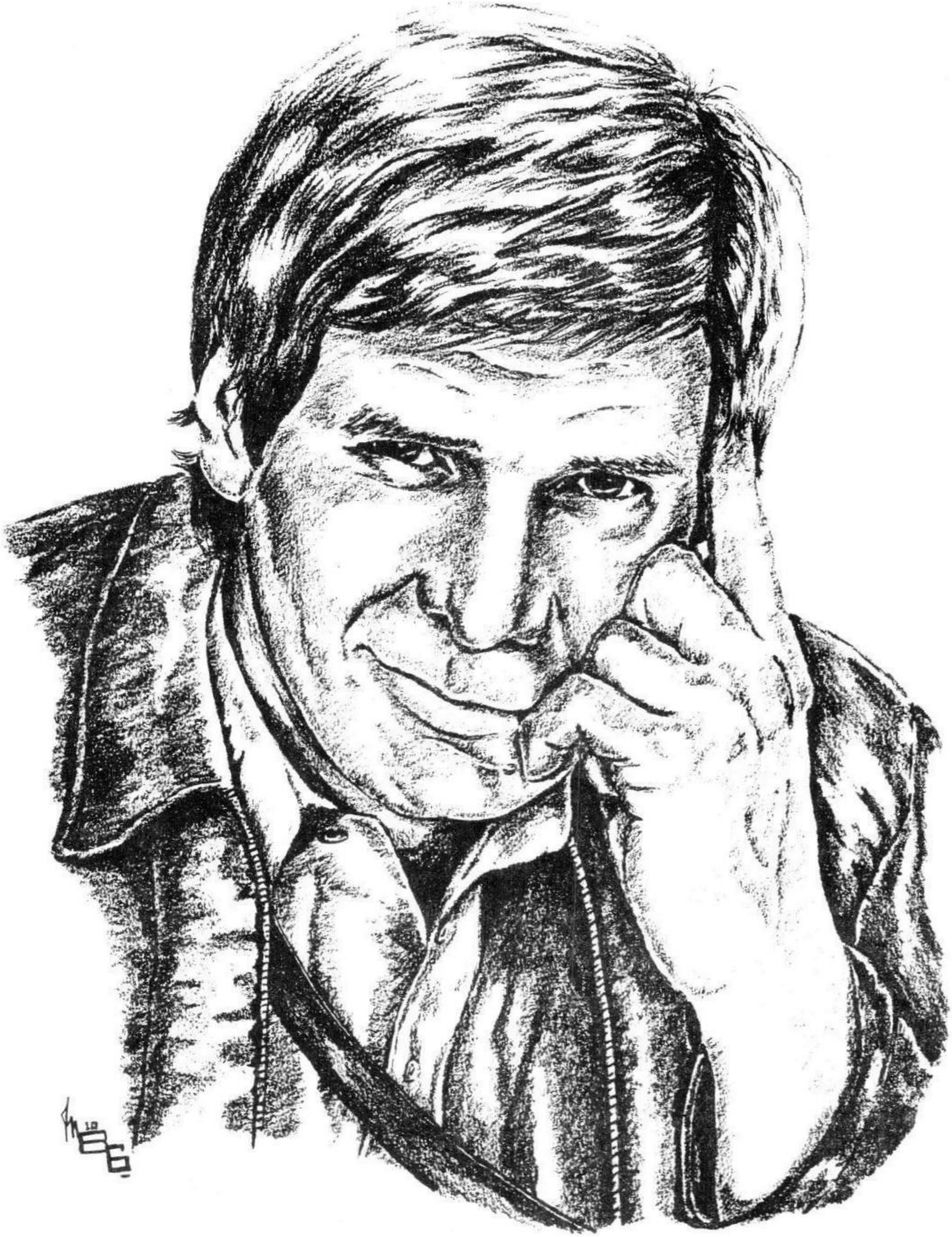
Art, when submitted to FLIP, should be no larger than 8½" x 11". We prefer to have clear, clean copies, rather than the originals, if possible. That way, if copies are lost or otherwise destroyed, we can always get additional copies from the artist.

As always, please keep any "love scenes" tastefully written.

We try to be as flexible as possible, so if your work presents an exception, talk to us about it. We can probably work out something.

Deadline for submissions to FLIP OF A COIN 12 is January 1, 1988, for publication in the Spring.

To reserve a copy, please send $4.00 deposit and SASE for final price notification.



BACK FROM VACATION

Just got in and picked up the mail.
Things have changed while I was gone.
Funny . . . I still picture Willie
In some nightclub singing that song.

Says here she went and got married.
Nice fancy script on the card.
Bet she got decked out in satin,
With pearls and lace by the yard.

Now here's something from Marion.
You know, I'll bet you a dime --
Uh-huh. "Proudly announce . . ."
Well, she can't blame me *this* time.

But I guess she's happy enough
With what's-his-name (Thomas? Paul?)
Whoever she ended up with --
Hard to keep track of 'em all.

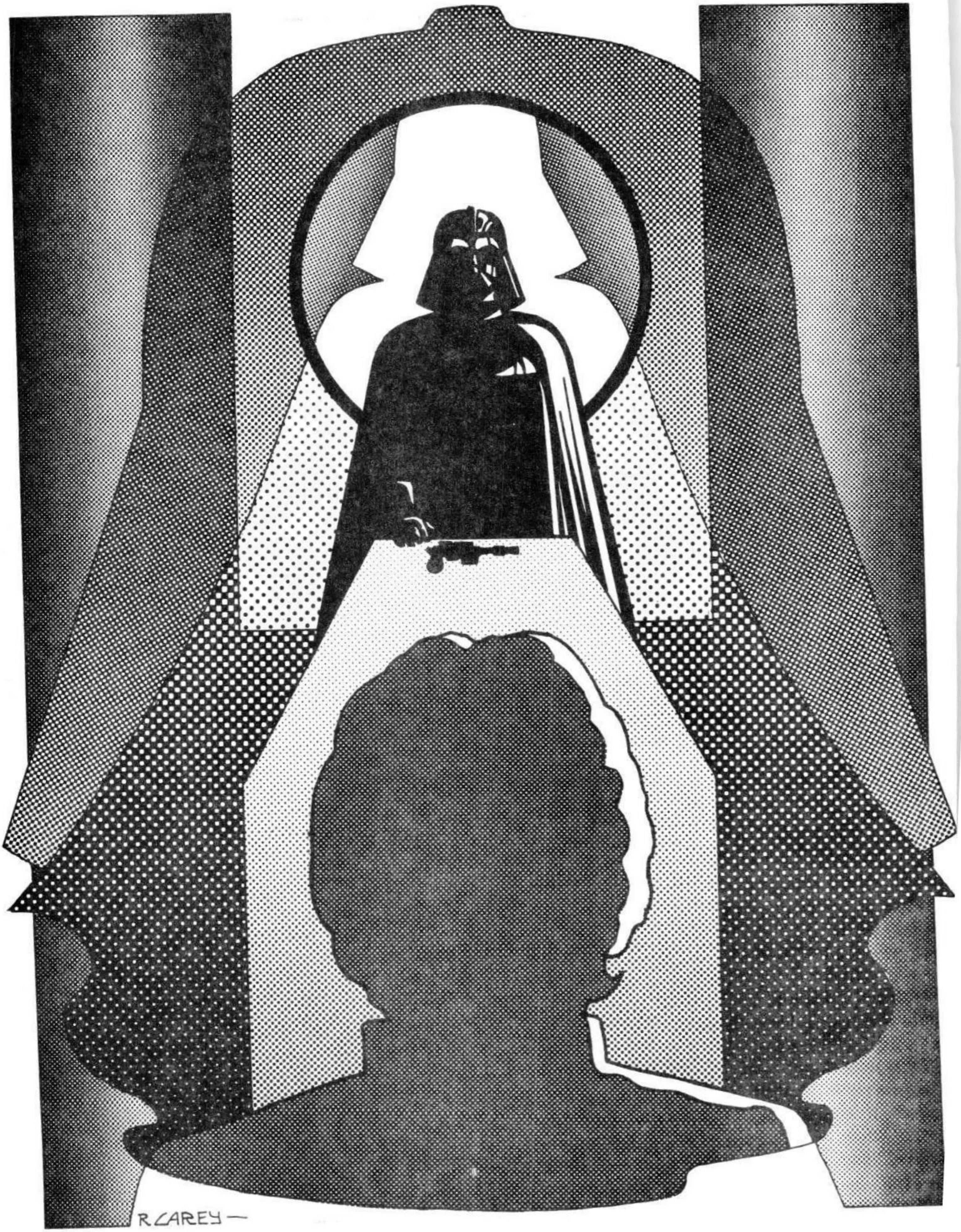
John, that's the one. Mrs. John Smith.
I still don't believe that name.
Three kids. I bet her figure's gone.
Now *that* would be a damn shame.

But it's none of my concern now
And, I mean, why should I care?
Willie . . . Marion . . . mm, frankly,
I'm glad they're out of my hair.

There's a whole world full of ladies
And life is so *very* short . . .
No ring in *my* nose -- hold the rice.
I'm not the marrying sort!

Jacqueline Taero

ILLUSTRATED BY
JIM MARKLE


R CAREY —

CONFRONTATION

ILLUSTRATED BY
REBECCA CAREY

Elaine Christiani

The smell of blaster fire hung over the elegant room. No one was eating anything, certainly not Vader, and Han Solo wondered briefly if the Dark Lord ever ate at all, or if evil thoughts and actions were his nourishment.

Before today Han had never believed that beings were good or evil or a blend of both. The strong and the weak; victor and vanquished; winner and loser. The rules were simple in his world. Then Darth Vader had plucked his still-firing blaster from his hand--from clear across the room. Now it lay beside his plate, useless as a toy. But shooting their way out of the dining hall had been a laughable hope; outside, the corridor was clogged with white armor, backed by the blue-clad local law.

Worlds can change. Or explode.

Above the gray and crimson of her Cloud City garb Leia's face was pale; her hand in his had felt steady but cold.

Satisfaction was evident in Vader's pose, his gloved fingers casually linked; that was the worst of it. Han had known men like him--though not on such a grand scale--and they never did anything just out of hate or anger. His, Leia's and Chewie's fates would be carefully considered, all possibilities explored, all options weighed.

Self-blame pricked Han, became an ache in his gut. If he and Chewie had gotten the hyperdrive to work, they wouldn't be in this fix. They would be at the rendezvous, reunited with Luke, miles away from this exquisitely laid trap. Fury made him fasten burning eyes on Lando Calrissian. The *Falcon*'s former captain sat opposite him, his dark face grave.

"Like being a traitor, Baron-Administrator?" Han asked easily, aware of the irony of the question. Not long ago he had been Lando's soulmate. Solo. Loyal to none but his mate and his ship. In it for the money. "We weren't pals, I know. But I never thought you'd whore for the Empire." Calrissian tensed, his eyes flicking away, but they swung back to Han. "And what did you do it for? Wealth? Power? No. I'll bet you did it for Cloud City. Better yet, for the *people* of Cloud City."

"Yes," Lando said hollowly. His sophistication had deserted him but his shoulders were rigidly straight beneath his blue cape. "I--we have friends here."

"I saw them." Han's voice went colder than Hoth at midnight. "This place will be crawling with 'troopers in a few hours, a few days at most. They'll turn it into just another Imperial outpost. The people here know nothing, and Vader doesn't need more slaves. So he'll just kill them. Maybe you, too." He smiled harshly. "Kiss your little kingdom goodbye, Baron. You've sentenced it to death."

Lando paled, turning slowly to the head of the table. Three pairs of eyes--man, woman, and Wookiee--followed.

"You would take the word of an outlaw over mine?" The metallic tones rattled the service. "I pay my debts, Calrissian. I've found it the best way to insure loyalty." Vader rose majestically, his black cape swirling like noxious smoke. The breath screen tilted toward Lando, and waited.

He dropped his eyes. "Pardon, my Lord."

Vader's head inclined graciously, and he turned toward the final member of the party. "And you, Fett? Have you doubts?"

"None, Lord." Boba Fett had remained standing throughout the non-meal, leaning on one armored shoulder against the wall, his rifle loosely cradled in his arms, ready to fire. "But I want to deliver Solo as soon as possible."

Ice skittered up Han's spine; Jabba wanted him bad if he'd sent this tin-plated bastard after him. That was encouraging. It could mean that the Hutt wouldn't have him executed--nor for awhile, anyway. *Probably put me on display somewhere...Good.* He'd be alive, and plotting an escape. Which would work, of course. It'd have to.

The doors slid open and the Empire's finest snapped to attention. "You are right, Fett. Pleasant as this time has been--" Vader nodded toward the untouched food and wine, clean dishes and glittering cutlery--"business must be attended to. I look forward to the completion of our agreement." He scooped Han's blaster from the table and everyone heard the faint give of metal. He gestured toward Solo with the butt of the weapon. "Captain."

Slowly the rebels rose from their chairs. Chewie looked almost comical as he extricated himself from the delicate-looking piece of furniture; his blue orbs pleaded with Han for action, but found no ally.

After a moment Lando got to his feet. He bowed coldly to Vader, then left the room without another word and took his place beside an Imperial officer.

Han looked down at Leia. Lando was right about one thing; she *was* absolutely beautiful. He regretted bitterly everything unsaid and undone. Especially undone. He'd been as stubborn as she about showing his feelings. Perhaps even more so. Leia had had a home and family and responsibilities, while he'd roamed the galaxy free of ties. Emotions stormed within him: *not fair, not fair*--love and passion welled up, giving his gaze a molten glow. Leia saw it and didn't blush or look away; she accepted it, returned it, trembling slightly with the weight of it as if he covered her. She reached for his hand.

"Return the princess to her quarters," Vader ordered.

A brush of skin and she was through the door. Outside, she shook free of her captors and took the stairs alone, head high, her back a clean graceful line, the hem of her embroidered translucent robe swinging gently. At the top step, she turned and looked back at Han, her soul in her eyes. Then, closely followed, she disappeared around the corner.

"A moving scene." Han's teeth gritted; Vader's voice was thick enough to eat. "Has the droid been placed in a cell?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Take the Wookiee there. He can pass the time reassembling it. *If* he can."

Chewie growled, the sound liquid and ugly. "Go, partner," said Han. "I'll see you soon."

He hoped.

Chewie lumbered out, his armed guard hanging back at a safe distance. Han smiled grimly, then turned back to Vader, who was visibly gloating behind his buglike mask.

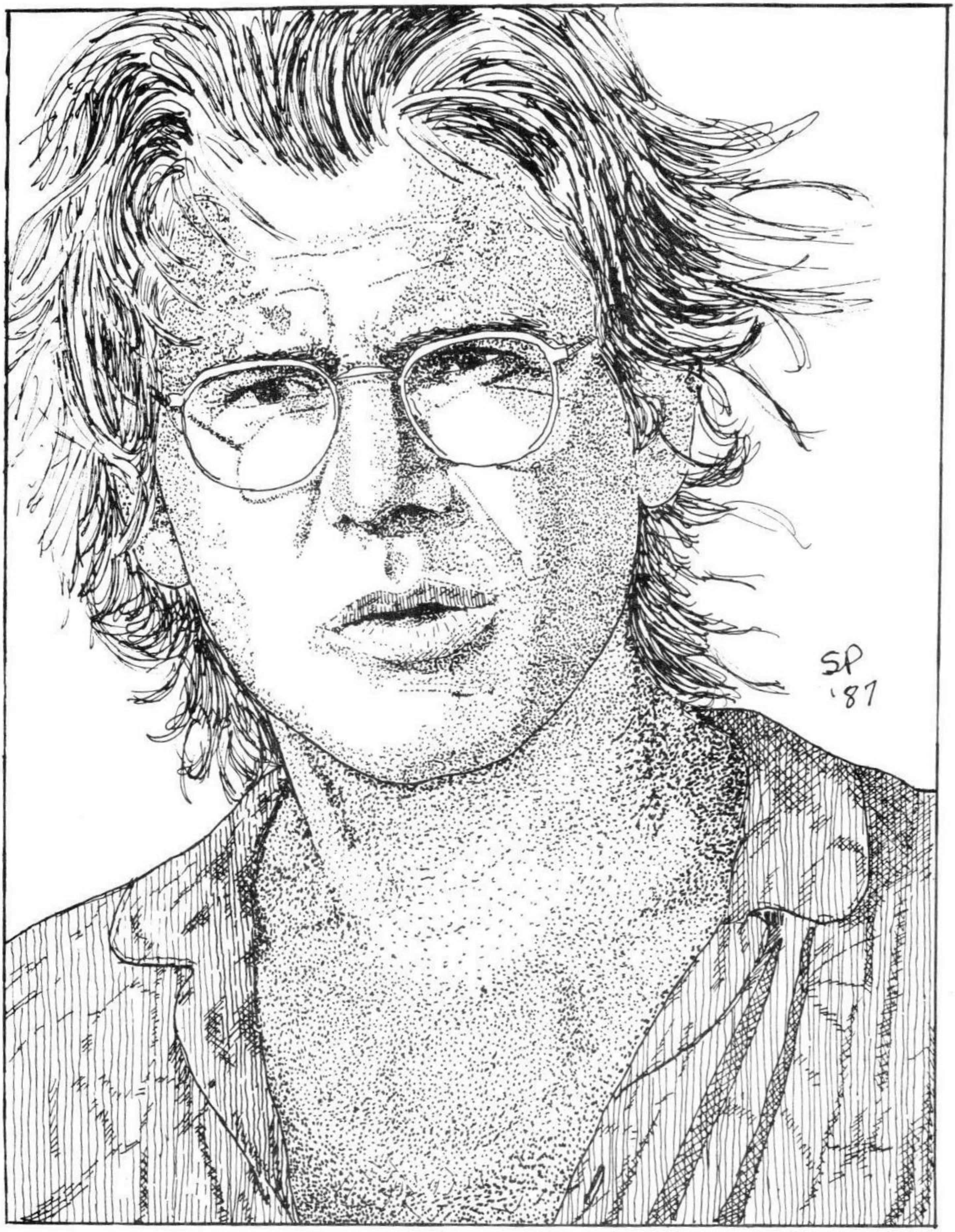
"Now, Captain Solo, we can continue our discussion...without distractions."

The remaining stormtroopers moved forward.

POLICE STORY

When she saw John get tough with a crook,
Rachel summed up the cop with one look.
But she found, to chagrin,
He was warm deep within
And his cover was not the whole Book.

-- Cypher


SP
'87

BLIND ALLEY

I have lived in the shadow
Of your genius
Blinded by the light
Of that incredible mind
And now that light is dying
(Oh, Allie, please don't close your eyes)
I never cared
That some had called you mad
I knew you loved me
With the same stubborn intensity
With which you pursued your dreams
(But, Allie, where have they led us?)
Don't leave me!
I can't go upstream without you
(You are my strength)
I took you as my husband
For better or worse
In my heart I swore
I would follow you to the end of the earth
(Oh, Allie, I think I have)

Tonya Cox

ILLUSTRATED BY
SHEILA PAULSON

DANI

THE DEBT

ILLUSTRATED BY
DANI

Sally A. Syrjala

General Solo. The title certainly had an impressive ring to it. Responsibility positively pealed from its syllables.

Han felt the uncomfortable weight those seven letters added to his shoulders. They signaled an end to his flight from life. For too long he had run from any type of permanence. Permanence represented loyalty and responsibility and forged an eternal ring of lasting commitment. Responsibility had been something whose bulk had stretched open old wounds far too painful to stand up to any type of display. That is what responsibility had meant to Han: exposure.

As to loyalty--who had honored Cadet Solo with bonds of loyalty? Only false accusations and a dishonorable drumming out of the Corellian Armed Services had been his portion. None, but Chewbacca, had stood by him. Why should Han Solo now loyally accept responsibility for others, as well as their causes?

Chewbacca had always been there, even during the worst. However, it was still difficult to show affection even to Chewie. It was only after years of shared companionship that trust had developed between the two of them. This speck of budding love eventually grew to include a handful of others.

Leia, Luke--even Lando--had joined with Chewie to brave Jabba's fortress. This had been done out of love, loyalty and responsibility to a friend--to him.

When such gifts of commitment are given, they need to be returned in kind. Solo was a man who believed in paying his debts. Too many unpaid notes had a way of coming due at the most inappropriate times.

The *Falcon* had always symbolized the feather-light days when gravity's pull was something to cast adrift. No ties of responsibility anchored him planetside in those days.

The vacuum of space sucked the substance from the marrow. It was too easy to let its hollow coldness become a part of you. It was far too easy to feel no bonds when the icy void was the blanket which enfolded your flesh and soul. Ties of responsibility were for those who enjoyed the warmth of fireside, not the depths of space.

The cold unfeeling brilliance of the far-off stars had been the only sparks in Han's universe. The unreachable light frozen forever just beyond the grasp. Seeable, but not reachable.

Frozen--just as he himself had been, both physically and emotionally. Fear-frozen into coldness and remoteness and glibness.

Once his soul had known and allowed warmth and openness, but what had that gained him except hurt and pain? Solo could still feel the wounds which his lowering of his protective shields had gained in the not so long ago past.

Those who had spoken words of love only abandoned him when the need of their love had been the greatest. The void which they left within him had sealed his soul from more feeling which could only bring more pain. What good was love when it only lived in the warm glow of the hour? The cold darkness of the endless night was what called out the need for love and the enduring bond that not even eternity could break.

This time it had been different. Rays of love had gone with him into the carbon-freeze chamber. This time he had not been alone, nor had he been abandoned.

Chewie, as always, continued to prove his commitment. And Leia. This time he had not been deserted for convenience sake. This time he had the support and the love of his woman to help him through his ordeal.

The warmth of a smile lit up Han's face as he remembered her words: "I love you." Yet he had known. Leia's love had been shown through actions and not words alone. She had stood in proud defiance to seal their love. It had been a kiss which held the breath of life for Han.

Han broke into a chuckle as he mentally compared that kiss to the one a fairy-tale princess had once received. In the story, her Prince Charming was there to wake her from the curse of a too long sleep. In his case, he had been the recipient of a kiss of a princess most charming who had awakened him to life as he had entered into his enforced sleep. The memories of Leia had gone with him and sustained him. They provided the glow which no darkness could entirely obliterate. They had provided him the comfort of knowing he was loved and was not alone in his plight. The warmth of that knowledge had kept him through the long darkness. It proved the spark that kept him sane.

Leia, Chewie, Luke--they had kept their promises and come for him. Even Lando had risked his life to save Han. Friends like that left a heavy debt to be paid. One far greater than Jabba's had ever been.

This was not the kind of debt that could be paid in material wealth. It was the type of debt that only commitment could repay. Friends had saved not only his physical self, but his emotional one as well. They brought back the feeling that had been frozen much longer than his body had been. The soul took a long time to unfreeze and the spark to begin the process had to be planted within.

Leia had given what was needed to allow the unfreezing to begin. Han now allowed the process to continue within him. He felt a desire, a need to tell Leia he loved her. To tell her not just in words, but in actions--the way she had shown her love for him.

Leia was committed to the Rebellion. It was as much a part of her as was her very soul. In fact, it *was* her very soul. A commitment to the Rebellion would be the same as a commitment to Leia. That was the first step.

"We need you." That is what Leia had said when he had told her he was leaving Hoth. Well, maybe "they" did. She and the Rebellion were one and the same in his eyes. Loyalty and commitment to the one was loyalty and commitment to the other.

He loved Leia. Yes, that was something he could now admit, even to himself. Now, too, he found he could also openly ally himself with the Rebellion.

He was hoping his acceptance of the commission of General in the Rebel Alliance would show Leia he could finally love again. The old wounds would always be there, only now they had grown a covering layer stronger than the original wound. It looked as if his friends had finally let him heal the scars forever.

Maybe he could make Leia see his love clearly enough someday to his declaration of "I love you," that she, too, might be able to respond with "I know."

Say What ?

(Some Alternate Scenarios)

BLADE RUNNER

"She's a replicant, isn't she?"
"Actually, Mr. Deckard, she's quite human. Your machine's defective."

RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK

"I need one of the pieces your father collected--a bronze piece about this size, with a hole in it, off-center, with a crystal. You know the one I mean?"
"Yeah. I lost it."

HANOVER STREET

"Baby, you'll drink coffee *or this conversation's at an end."*

FORCE 10 FROM NAVARONE

"Gonna miss your plane unless you join us now, Major."
"If it's all the same to you, Colonel Barnsby, we've changed our minds. We picked up a couple of cut-rate tickets on Air Yugoslav."

AMERICAN GRAFFITI

"Scratch the race, Milner; I'm out of gas."

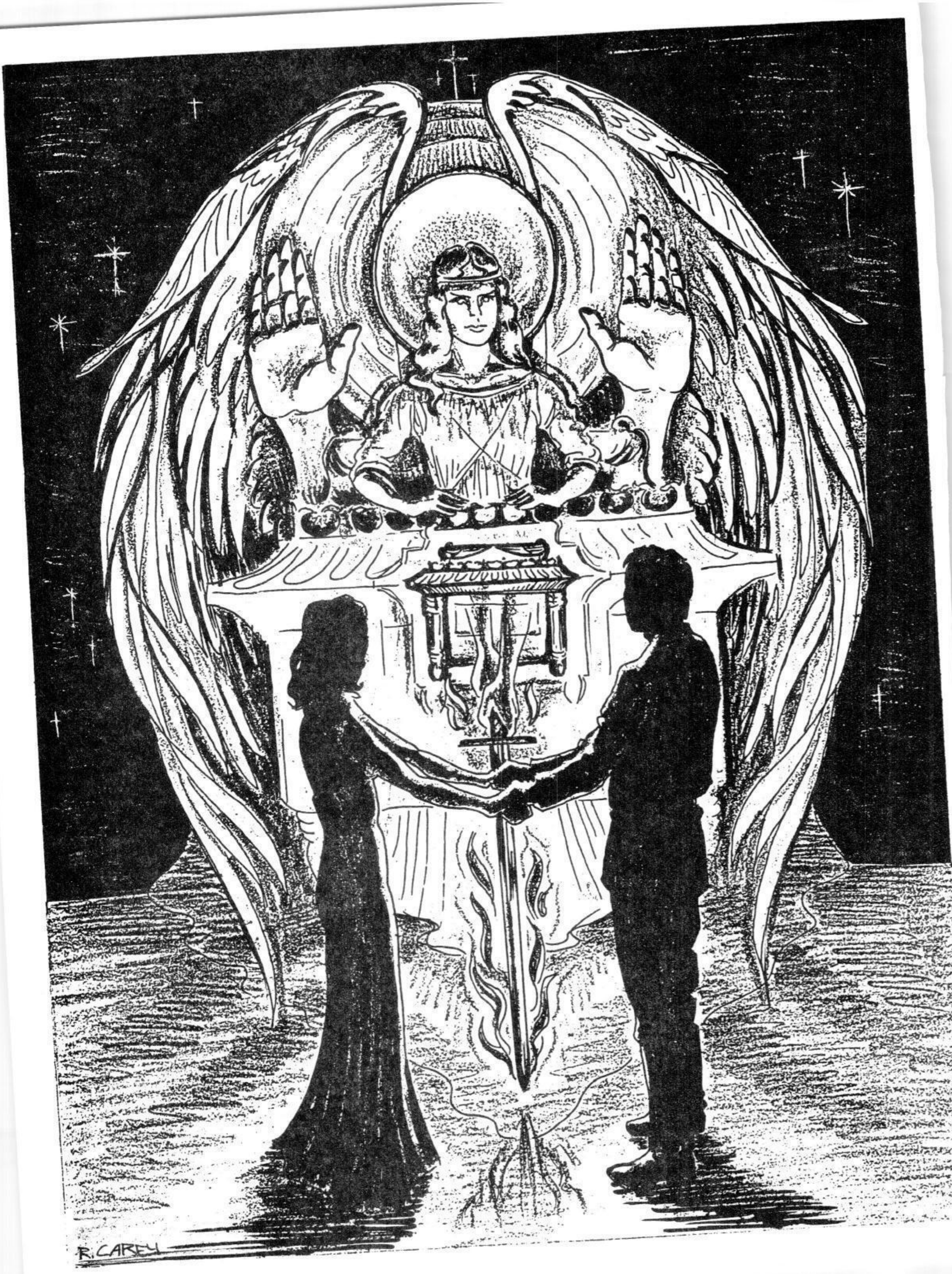
THE MOSQUITO COAST

"Forget it, Allie; we're not going!"

HEROES

"Rabbits? We don't need no stinkin' rabbits."

Cypher



R. CAREY

ANGEL OF MERCY

ILLUSTRATED BY
REBECCA CAREY

Jean Marie Dewey

Dedicated to:

Karen B. For the Advice

Sylvia K. For the Camels

PROLOGUE

The column of fire, erupting from the Ark, took on a strangely human form. Bolts of light sprang from the "hands," striking down the German soldiers gathered there. Then the "arms" gestured and a wall of flame swept out across the canyon floor.

Oddly, the wall of fire parted and flowed around the two people tied to a post, never touching them. The man and woman, their eyes tightly closed, screamed in unknowing fear.

Then, abruptly, the flame retreated back to the Ark and fountained into a column of fire reaching to the clouds in the sky overhead. The figure gestured again and the fire sank back into the Ark and the lid slammed down. Silence reigned; the canyon floor was swept smooth, with no sign that men had ever stood there.

On the other side of the canyon, the man moved and discovered that he was free. He cautiously opened his eyes and looked at his hands. The ropes that had bound him were burnt through and still smoked. Yet, he and the woman were unscathed. He turned to his companion and touched her shoulder. "Marion?"

With a gasp, she opened her eyes and threw herself into his arms. They clung together for a brief time, then turned and looked at the Ark.

"Indy," Marion said weakly, "what happened?"

"I did," a soft, musical voice answered behind them.

Indy and Marion spun around and stared at the glowing figure that had suddenly appeared. The figure was female and clad in robes of flame-gold that glittered and shone. Great metallic gold wings hung from her shoulders. The shining light made it difficult for Indy and Marion to see their rescuer clearly.

"Who...who are you?" Marion whispered finally.

"I am the Guardian of the Ark," the woman replied. She gestured towards the empty canyon. "I am the one who punished your...companions for threatening the Ark."

"Why are we still alive?" Indy asked warily.

"What happened here was not of your doing. You tried to keep the Ark out of their hands, even though you were the one to remove it from its resting place." She gestured again. "Your intentions were good; thus, you were spared. Now it is time for you to go--and take the Ark with you."

Indy looked at her sharply. "Go where? How are we going to get off this rock?"

The woman smiled. "Go to the harbor. There you will find the freighter that you were travelling on. The captain chose to follow after you."

"And you want us to take the Ark?" Indy was openly suspicious now.

The woman nodded calmly. "The Ark must be hidden from the Germans. Your taking it will accomplish that." She smiled. "I give you my word of honor; you will not be harmed."

Indy looked at Marion, who finally nodded. They started across the canyon. Behind them, the woman raised her hand. "Farewell, my friends. May the Almighty protect you. And, perhaps, some day, we shall meet again."

She vanished. Indy and Marion looked at each other for a moment, then moved towards the Ark.

ONE YEAR LATER

The oasis was deserted at first. Then a shimmering light appeared and coalesced into the figure of a young woman. Her eyes opened slowly and she looked around. With a deep, heartfelt sigh, she walked to the pool and sank down beside it, studying her image in the still water.

The reflected face was striking: a golden-brown oval with a straight, well-shaped nose and generous mouth. The almond-shaped eyes were a startling clear gray fringed with thick black lashes; the winged eyebrows were the same color as the lashes. Silky black hair cascaded in waves almost to the young woman's waist. The gray eyes, however, were filled with sadness. This unusual young woman was terribly unhappy.

A soft voice suddenly called to her out of nowhere. "Little Sister!"

Her head came up and she searched the skies. "Kadin? Is that you?" Her voice was low and musical.

A silvery glow behind her solidified into the form of a young man gliding over to stand beside the young woman. "Yes, little one. I am here."

She sighed. "You shouldn't be. You know that I have been exiled."

"What do you expect? Arguing with Him. Really, Arella!"

"I do not care what *He* says. I was not about to harm Jones *or* his woman!"

"Jones *did* disturb the Ark. And the curse..."

"Yes, I know! But...oh, never mind! I've been through all this with Him."

"It is because of your friend, Jones, that I am here, little one."

Her head snapped up. "What's wrong?" she asked quickly.

"Jones is in grave danger," Kadin told her. "The Nazis have found his new dig. It does not take a great deal of imagination to guess what they plan to do to him."

"Are *they* there?" the young woman demanded.

"Jones is there, his wife is not. She is in Cairo with the Egyptian, Sallah."

The young woman sprang to her feet. "I have to warn him! Where is this dig?"

"I will take you there, if you wish. We must hurry though. There is very little time left."

They joined hands and closed their eyes, both frowning in concentration. Both bodies began to shimmer, then fade. Soon the oasis was deserted again.

* * *

Indiana Jones walked out of his tent, stretching stiffly. Squinting against the early morning sun, he scanned the small camp and frowned. The uneasy feeling he'd awakened with hadn't faded. Something was wrong; he could feel it in the air.

Indy shook his head. His uneasiness was probably due to the fact Marion wasn't there. He didn't like to admit it, but he hated having her away from him for very long.

He straightened. Enough thinking; it was time to get to work. This dig was showing signs of promise. They hadn't found much yet, but the few things they had uncovered seemed to be worth the effort. But Marcus Brody was the one who'd be able to determine the full value of the dig.

Indy smiled slightly. Marcus would be there by nightfall, along with Marion and Sallah. He was looking forward to seeing his old friend again.

Omar appeared at Indy's side. The older man was in charge of the native diggers while Sallah was in Cairo.

"Morning, Omar," Indy said. "The men about ready to get to work?"

"Yes, Doctor Jones. Where do you wish us to work today?"

"Let's stay up on the ridge. I've got a hunch we'll find something there."

Omar nodded. He started to leave, then hesitated. "Doctor Jones?"

"What is it?" Indy asked absently.

"I am not sure this is important..."

"What?"

"One of the men reported that he saw two strangers watching the camp."

"When?" Indy snapped.

"Two days ago. They were there for quite some time, but they approached no one in the camp."

"Natives?"

Omar shook his head. "Ahmed stated that both seemed to be Westerners, with light hair and brown clothing. They were too far away to see much more."

Indy's lips tightened grimly. His uneasy feeling was growing. "Something's not right," he muttered.

Omar watched him curiously. Indy shook his head. "Let's get started," he ordered, "and have the men keep an eye out for any more 'strangers'."

The two men started walking through the camp when Indy stopped abruptly. Omar started to speak, but Indy held up his hand to silence him. There was a faint rumbling above the usual camp noises. Indy tensed as it grew louder.

"Warn the men!" he yelled at Omar. "I think we've got trouble!" Indy ran back to his tent. He grabbed his gun and bullwhip and ducked outside again.

Two German transport trucks rolled into the camp. As they stopped, soldiers began to emerge and grab anyone they could. The native men panicked and fled.

Indy ducked behind a nearby tent. Crouching down, he peered around the side. Suddenly, a shadow fell on him. "*Guten morgen*," a voice drawled behind him. There was the sound of a gun's safety clicking off. Indy slowly turned around, still crouching. A German soldier stood there, gun at the ready and aimed at Indy. There was a sly grin on the man's face. "*Stehen*!" he snapped, gesturing with the gun for Indy to get to his feet.

Indy started to stand. Then, unexpectedly, he snapped the bullwhip, wrapping it around the soldier's legs, and jerked back, pulling the man off balance. The soldier fell heavily, hitting his head on a rock. The gun flew out of his hand and went off as it hit the ground.

"Shit!" Indy lunged to his feet.

Other soldiers had heard the shot and came running. Indy emptied his gun at the approaching men. A few dropped, but there were far more Germans than bullets. Indy flung the gun away with a curse and tightened his grip on the bullwhip.

At first, he was able to keep the soldiers at bay. None was willing to move within range of the whip. Then Indy wrapped the lash around one man's wrist. The soldier reacted wrong; he grabbed the whip and pulled back, the sudden move catching Indy off guard. He stumbled forward, letting go of the whip, and was immediately buried under bodies.

"*Achtung!*" a voice snapped out of nowhere.

The soldiers slowly and reluctantly came to attention. Indy, badly winded and bruised, was dragged to his feet by two of the men and restrained. A third man held a gun on him. An officer, wearing a Nazi colonel's insignia, strode forward.

"Well, Doctor Jones. We meet at last," he said with an unpleasant smile.

Indy shook his head to clear it. "Do I know you?" he asked faintly.

The officer laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. "I am Colonel Dessauer. I served under Colonel Dietrich at Tanis."

"I don't remember you," Indy said slowly.

"Of course not. We never met. Colonel Dietrich left me in charge of the troops still at Tanis while he and Captain Gobler went to Cairo. Neither returned; thanks to you, I understand."

Indy said nothing. Dessauer looked around the camp. His men had complete control by this time. "Where is your wife, Doctor Jones?" he asked casually. "Is she not with you?"

His guards tightened their grip as they felt Indy tense. "Marion's in the States," he said flatly.

Dessauer raised an eyebrow. "Indeed?" he said in obvious disbelief. "How odd. Our agents in Cairo reported seeing her there yesterday. No matter. I am sure she will be here eventually. As for you, Doctor Jones, you will be taking a trip to Berlin." Indy froze at the Colonel's words. "I fear," Dessauer went on, "that you have made the Fuehrer very angry by depriving him of the Ark. I understand that he wishes to deal with you personally."

He looked around the camp again. "I think we will continue with this excavation. You have a remarkable talent for finding things of value in the oddest places. Besides," his smile deepened, "your wife or your Egyptian friend just might return. I am certain that you would enjoy their company."

"No!" Indy exploded. With a heave, he freed his right arm and swung at the soldier holding his left. The man went down like a felled tree. Indy lunged at Dessauer. At the same time, something slammed into the side of his head. Blackness engulfed him as he collapsed at the Colonel's feet.

Behind a nearby dune, the air shimmered and the pair from the oasis appeared. The young woman hurried forward, climbing the dune until she could peer over the top. She inhaled sharply as she surveyed the camp. They were too late! The Nazis had already taken control. She searched for Jones, wondering if he was still there. Maybe there was a chance...

No! There he was, facing the Nazi commander. The woman clenched her fists in frustration. As she watched, Jones broke free and lunged at the man confronting him. The butt of a soldier's rifle slammed against his head and he dropped.

The young woman grimaced. Eyes dark with barely controlled anger, she watched as Jones was dragged off. Then she slipped back down to rest at the foot of the dune. Kadin joined her, watching in concern as she struggled to control her rage.

Finally she had herself in check. She sighed and let Kadin help her stand.

"We are too late," his voice was matter-of-fact.

The young woman nodded absently, eyes narrowed in thought. She looked up at her companion. "Kadin--could you...?"

He shook his head violently. "No, Little Sister! I cannot interfere; it is forbidden. I risk a great deal in helping you *this* much."

The young woman nodded dejectedly. Then a calculating gleam came to her eyes and a sly smile grew along with an idea. She glanced up at Kadin, sharing her thoughts with him. He nodded finally. "That should be within your powers. I will remain here. But--be careful, Little Sister."

The young woman closed her eyes and concentrated. Her pale gold caftan shimmered, then slowly changed into the heavy black robes worn by Muslim women. She opened her eyes and looked down at herself in satisfaction. Fastening the veil over her face, she bade a silent farewell to Kadin, then, cautiously, slipped around the dune and into the camp.

She moved in the direction she'd seen the commanding officer take. She finally spotted him ahead of her and slipped closer until she was within a few yards of him. Half-hidden by a convenient tent, she watched the man with hooded eyes.

Dessauer was giving orders to his second-in-command. He finished and turned to leave, then hesitated.

"Is there something else, *Herr Oberst*?" the captain asked.

Dessauer faced him again, a strange expression in his eyes. "Yes." His voice was slow and controlled. "We must see to it that the prisoner reaches Germany in good health."

"Sir?"

"See that his injuries are treated," the Colonel continued, "and he is to be fed."

"*Jawohl, Herr Oberst!*" the Captain saluted as Dessauer left. He turned and noticed a native woman loitering nearby. "You!" he snapped, "Come here!"

The woman moved forward hesitantly, eyes cast down in modesty. She stopped a few feet away from the officer. "You will go with this man," he instructed, motioning to a nearby soldier. "He will take you to the prisoner. You will treat the man's wounds, but you *will not* speak to him or try to free him. Do you understand?"

"Yes, *Herr* Captain," she replied in a soft voice.

The Captain watched as his man led her away. He shook his head, wondering what Colonel Dessauer was up to now.

* * *

Indy slowly began to regain consciousness. His head ached excrutiatingly and his body felt as though it was one massive bruise. His shoulders were cramped and his mouth bone-dry. He shifted around, trying to ease the cramp in his shoulders, and discovered that he couldn't move at all. His eyes snapped open. The light caused him to wince in pain. The second time, he opened his eyes barely enough to see.

He was in his own tent; he recognized the mess. And he was sitting against the tent pole. He could feel it. But--why? He looked down and discovered the reason he couldn't move. He was securely tied to the tent pole. His wrists were lashed to the pole itself. One rope was wrapped tightly around his waist and arms; another around his chest. His legs were bound together, just below his knees and at his ankles.

Indy tried to yell, only to discover that he had been gagged as well. He struggled violently for a few moments, trying to break loose. All he did was attract the attention of the guard, who came into the tent.

Indy's eyes widened when he saw the man. He remembered now! The Nazis! They'd taken over the camp. When Marion and Sallah returned, they would walk into a trap. He had to do something!

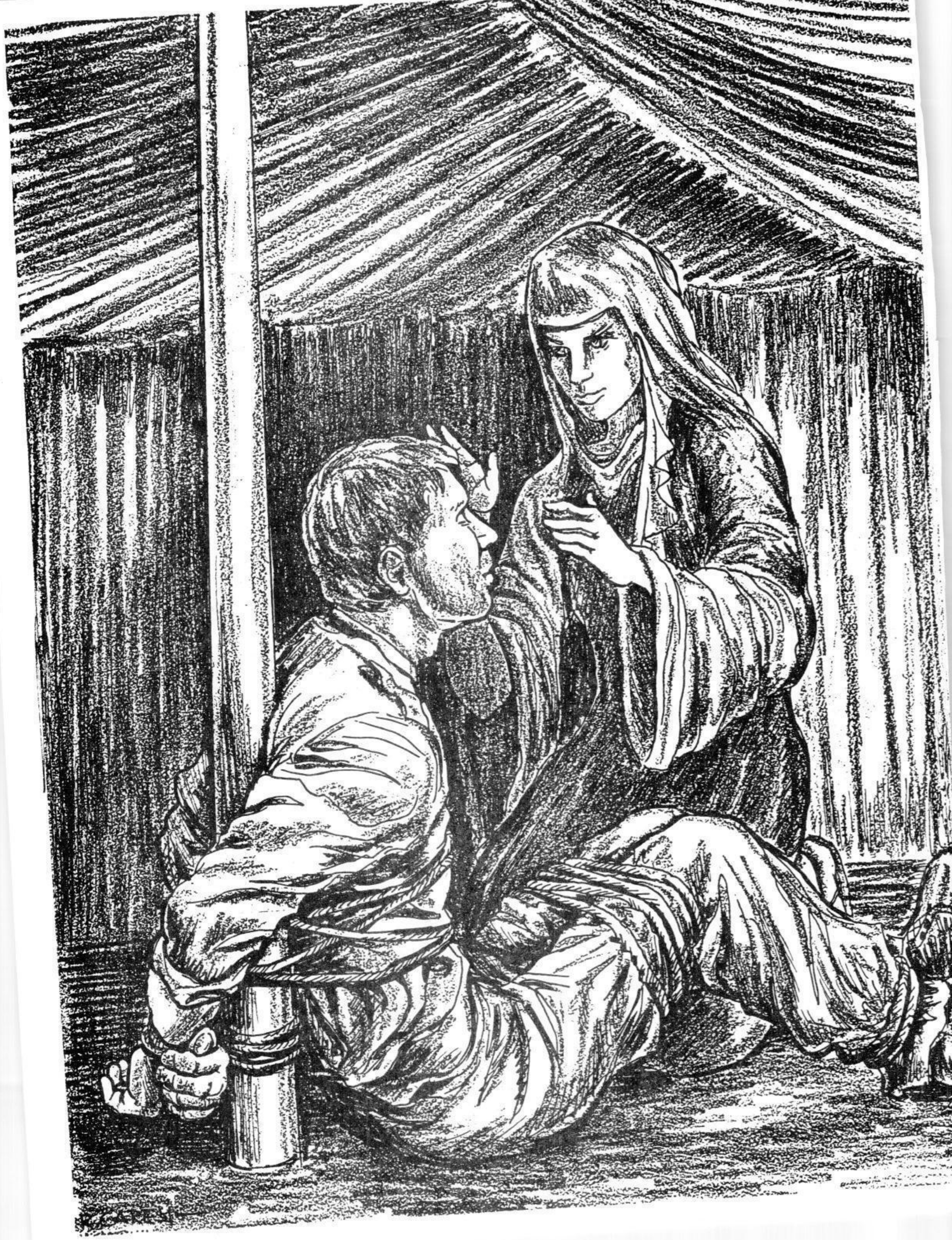
Before Indy could even try to think, another soldier came into the tent. He was followed by a native woman carrying a tray. She sat it down on a nearby table and stood waiting, eyes down.

"Do you remember the Captain's orders?" the soldier snapped at her.

"Yes." Her reply was soft, almost inaudible.

"*Gut!* You!" the soldier nodded to the guard. "Stay and watch her. See that she does what she was told." He left. The guard watched the woman for a moment, then he stiffened slightly.

"I will be outside," he said in a flat voice and left the tent. When he was gone, the native woman sighed with relief and reached up to unfasten her veil. Only then did she turn to face Indy.



His eyes widened in surprise. This was no Egyptian, not with eyes and skin that color. There was something strangely familiar about her, but Indy couldn't think what it was. He strained against the ropes.

She hurried over to him and knelt. "Hush!" she whispered, "I can only control the one guard. Should anyone else hear you, we are both dead."

Indy nodded, although he didn't quite understand the warning. The woman reached up and untied the gag. "I know you!" Indy gasped when he could speak, "I've seen you somewhere before."

She nodded reluctantly. "I am...I *was* the Guardian; the Guardian of the Ark. You may call me Arella, Arella Samara."

She began to probe at the swelling on the side of Indy's head and he winced at the pain. But the touch of her fingers was cool and the pain faded--along with Indy's headache. He eyed her warily. "If you're *that* Guardian, then you're an..."

Arella shook her head. "I *was*," she explained softly, "I have been exiled to mortal form. Most of my powers have been taken from me."

She began to doctor Indy's other cuts and bruises. He saw the sadness in her eyes. "Why?" he asked quietly.

She sat back and looked at him steadily. "Last year--I spared your lives. But the curse was on anyone who *disturbed* the Ark. I did not fulfill that curse, so I must now bear the consequences."

"I'm sorry," Indy said finally. Arella smiled faintly and went back to work on him. After a few more minutes, Indy spoke again. "You can't get me out of here then, can you?"

Arella shook her head reluctantly. "No. At least, not without other help."

Indy looked grim. "Then promise me something."

"If it is within my power."

He took a deep breath. "Go to my wife in Cairo. Tell her what happened. Tell her...I said to go back to the States with Marcus. There's nothing she can do to help me now. And Sallah should take his family away, too. Somewhere where they'll be safe from the Nazis."

"I will tell them," Arella said, "but I cannot promise that they will heed me." Her head snapped up suddenly. She stared intently at the tent entrance, then began replacing things on the tray.

"What's wrong?

"Someone is coming. I must leave," Arella explained quickly. "I will have to replace your gag."

Indy nodded. She tied the gag around his head again, though not as tightly as before. Then she refastened her veil and sprang to her feet. She picked up the tray and turned to leave. She hesitated and turned back. Indy looked at her steadily. "I will do all I can to help you," Arella promised.

She left the tent just as Dessauer and his aide appeared. The Colonel stopped her. "The prisoner has been tended?" Arella nodded silently, keeping her eyes down. "*Gut*." Dessauer let her go. "Now, get out of here, woman. Get back to your work."

"Yes, *Herr Oberst*," Arella replied softly and walked off, tray in hand. She ducked into an empty tent, out of sight of any soldiers, and set the tray down. She went outside again and left the camp as quietly as she'd entered it.

Kadin was waiting for her as he'd promised. She shared her information with him silently. "I must go to Cairo," she said finally, "I promised to warn Marion Jones."

"I doubt she will listen to you."

Arella shrugged. "Perhaps. But I must go. I gave my word."

"And after that?"

"Only the Master knows. What about you, Kadin?"

"I will remain here and watch the camp. If they try to move Jones, I will give you warning. I can do no more."

Arella reached up to touch his face. "Thank you, Kadin. I truly appreciate what you are doing."

He smiled. "You must hurry, Little Sister. And--may the Master guide you."

Arella returned his smile. Then she gathered her robes around her and vanished.

Indy watched as Dessauer came into the tent. The Colonel looked quite pleased with himself. He nodded to the Captain, who moved to stand behind Indy. "So, Doctor Jones," Dessauer's voice was silky, "I hope you are comfortable." Indy stared into space, ignoring the German. Dessauer laughed. "I see. You are going to be stubborn, Doctor Jones." Dessauer sounded quite pleased. "Very well. We have ways of dealing with such stubbornness."

He gestured for the Captain to remove Indy's gag. "Now, then, Doctor Jones," he continued smoothly, "would you care to tell me what it is that you are looking for this time?"

Indy said nothing, continuing to act as though no one was there. The Colonel frowned and slapped him. "You will look at me when I speak to you!"

he hissed angrily. Indy glanced at him reluctantly. "Now--tell me what you are digging for!"

"No!" Indy's voice was quiet, but firm.

Dessauer studied him through narrowed eyes, then nodded. "Very well. You force me to take harsher steps, Doctor Jones. Guards!" A trio of soldiers entered the tent. "Remove the prisoner to the--er--dig and secure him there," Dessauer ordered. "Then bring me the *Schlangenman.*" He turned to Indy. "You see, Doctor Jones, we have heard of your one--*weakness*, shall we say?"

Indy stiffened, a hint of apprehension showing in his eyes. Dessauer noted his reaction with pleasure and continued. "Perhaps if we leave you alone in the excavation with a few *schlangen*, you might be more willing to cooperate." He smiled slowly. "Ah, I forgot! You do not understand German very well, do you? Forgive me. The word for *schlangen* in English is, I believe, snakes..."

* * *

Arella peered out of the alley cautiously. A few doors down was the home of the Egyptian digger, Sallah. As Arella watched, a truck pulled up in front of the building. Sallah himself got out of the driver's side; another man left the passenger's.

Arella studied this stranger curiously. He was an older man with thinning black hair and the air of a scholar. But there was a hint of the adventurer in the solid body just beginning to soften. His smile, when he turned to Sallah, was warm and seemed to light up his entire face. Arella guessed that this was Marcus Brody, Jones' friend and colleague. As she watched, the two men disappeared into the building.

Arella sighed and leaned back against the wall. Everyone was there. Now she had the unpleasant task of telling them the news of Jones' capture. She was not looking forward to doing it. She took a deep breath and pulled herself up, then started to leave the alley. She froze, then quickly shrank back into the shadows and took a deep breath. She'd almost missed the two men watching the house.

She peered around the corner again. Yes, there they were. Two men, neatly dressed in western clothing, were watching Sallah's home from another alley. Arella's lips tightened; she sensed that they were German agents. This would make things even more difficult.

Her eyes narrowed in concentration, then she nodded to herself. A basket, full of bread, appeared at her feet. Arella pulled her veil back over her face and fastened it securely, then pulled the hood of her robe as far forward as she could to shadow her face. She picked up the basket and boldly stepped out into the street.

Arella calmly walked along, crossing to the other side of the road and moving with the crows. She could see the German agents out of the corner of her eye. They were paying little attention to the street people. The ones they were interested in were inside the house.

Arella went up to the front door of Sallah's home and knocked briskly. The door opened after a few minutes' wait.

Fayah, working in the kitchen, looked up and frowned. Someone was knocking on the front door. As far as she knew, no one was expected. Her frown deepened; perhaps something had happened at the dig. She hurried to the door, then cautiously opened it. A woman stood there, holding a basket of bread. Fayah's frown deepened even more.

"We have no need..."

"Wait," the woman said in a low voice, using flawless Arabic, "I must speak with your husband." Fayah hesitated, wary of this stranger. "Please!" the woman said urgently. "I come from the camp. I have a message from Doctor Jones."

"Very well," Fayah said finally. "Come in." After the woman entered quickly, Fayah closed the door and locked it. "Wait here," she ordered, "I will fetch my husband."

When Fayah was gone, Arella set her basket down and unfastened her veil, then pushed the hood down. She wondered what Sallah's reaction would be when he saw her. Would he even remember? Somehow, Arella thought, he'd remember her all too well.

Just then, Sallah came into the hall followed by Marion Jones and Marcus Brody, with Fayah hovering in the background. The Egyptian was frowning darkly. "What do you...?" He broke off and stared at Arella closely. "You! What...?"

Arella sighed. This was not going to be easy at all. "I am Arella Samara. I have a message for you from Doctor Jones." Marcus started when she said her name, then studied her intently.

"You've come from Indy?" Marion said quickly. "What's wrong? Where is he?"

Arella ignored the questions. "Doctor Jones insists that Doctor Brody take you back to the United States, ma'am. You and your family are to go as well, good Sallah."

"Why?" he demanded fiercely.

Arella took a deep breath. "Doctor Jones is in German hands," she replied quietly. "They found the camp and overran it."

Marion turned pale and clutched at Marcus who put an arm around her. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am a friend," Arella replied calmly. "I wish only to help you."

"But..." Marcus was still wary.

"My friend," Sallah's voice was low, but deep, "we can trust her. She has helped me before."

Arella's eyes gleamed and there was a faint hint of a smile on her lips as she nodded to the Egyptian. He had remembered their first meeting when the young Nazi soldier had been ordered to kill Sallah and Arella had appeared to prevent it. Sallah would be a valuable ally. Now she had to convince the others.

"I was able to speak briefly with Doctor Jones," she explained. "He made me promise to bring the message. You cannot help him. You must leave--go to safety."

"No!" Marion said vehemently, "I *will not* leave without Indy!"

"But, Marion," Marcus tried to reason with her, "we must be realistic. The three of us cannot take on the German Army."

"Four of us," Arella interjected. She looked at Marcus steadily. "I wish to help, as well."

"One more will make no difference."

"Indy, Sallah and I took on the German Army," Marion pointed out, "and we succeeded."

"And very nearly got yourselves killed doing it," Marcus reminded her.

Arella chuckled softly. Marcus looked at her sharply. Unruffled, she returned his gaze, a knowing gleam in her gray eyes. Marcus frowned; there was something definitely odd about this young woman. Her name... He shook his head; it couldn't be that.

"May I say something?" Arella spoke hesitantly. "I have a plan that, with your help, just might succeed."

"What's in it for you?" Marion demanded suspiciously. "Why do you want to help *my* husband?"

Arella looked at her evenly. "Your husband needs help--anyone's help."

Marion stared at her intently. She had the strangest feeling she should know this young stranger. But why--and where? An answer slowly began to form in her mind. She shook her head; it couldn't be! But the idea refused to go away. How could this very solid, very real young woman be the Ark's Guardian? But Marion knew that had to be where she'd seen this Arella--on the island. "Oh, Lord!" she whispered. Arella smiled and nodded. Marion took a deep breath. "All right, then," she said calmly enough. "Let's hear this plan of yours."

* * *

"We can leave as soon as we are ready," Sallah reported, coming into the room.

"It is not that easy," Arella said slowly.

"What do you mean?" Marcus asked sharply.

"The house is being watched by Nazi agents."

"What? Are you certain?"

Arella nodded. "There are two outside on the street. That is why I disguised myself to come here. And I can sense the presence of others behind the house."

"Damn!" Marion exploded. "How the hell do we get out of here?"

Arella flinched at the curses, then caught herself and looked at the others.

"What about using the children to create a diversion?" Marcus suggested.

"No!" Fayah cried fiercely, "I will not allow it!"

"Nor will I," Arella added. "Perhaps...perhaps there is something else I could do." She didn't sound overly sure of herself, though.

"Come," Fayah said briskly. "We must finish the preparations for your... mission."

"I'll come give you a hand," Marion offered and the two of them left the room.

"I should go upstairs and gather some necessities," Marcus said and also left.

Sallah stayed, watching Arella who paced the room like a caged animal. "I wish to thank you for what you did last year," he said finally.

Arella stopped and looked at him. She smiled reluctantly. "There is no need. You were under my protection. Besides, I do not think that young soldier would have shot you. It was not in him."

Her eyes clouded over as she remembered her lost powers, so vital that last time. She flung herself across the room in anger. "Blast this human body!" she stormed. "Had I my true form, none of this would be necessary! Oh, why was I so cursed!"

Sallah studied her appreciatively. "A body such as yours is no curse." Arella glanced at him, still not happy. Sallah continued. "My dear young lady, were it not for my beloved Fayah--*and* my nine children--*and* for what you truly are..." He gave a deep, heartfelt sigh.

Arella smiled, amused and touched by his gallantry. "Indeed, *dear* Sallah, if it were not for your Fayah--*and* your nine children--*and* what I truly am, I just might be tempted."

Sallah was startled by her response; it wasn't what he'd expected. He wasn't at all certain of what he should do now. "Ah...yes," he said weakly, then drew himself up. "Unfortunately, the fates are against us." He hesitated, then said, "Excuse me, Arella. I think I must go and see to the...the camels."

Arella raised an eyebrow, noticing the faint blush on Sallah's face. "Camels?" she said in mock puzzlement, "Sallah--we have no camels."

"That is what I mean. I must go and purchase some. One can never have too many camels in the desert."

He turned and left the room in considerable haste. Watching him leave, Arella convulsed in silent laughter, eyes glowing with her barely contained amusement.

* * *

Indy pulled against the ropes restraining him. The Germans had brought him deep inside the dig to a small antechamber and bound him securely, in a seated position, to a large pillar in the center of the chamber. A few flaming torches, set in wall cressets, lit the room.

Colonel Dessauer walked into the chamber, followed by four of his soldiers and an old Egyptian man carrying a large wicker basket. Indy tensed. He was determined not to let Dessauer see his fear.

The Colonel smiled at his captive. "Are you enjoying yourself, Doctor Jones?" he asked smoothly. "Ah, well, your 'accommodations' are not perhaps the finest, but you will not be alone at least."

He gestured for the old man to come forward. Indy glanced over the Colonel's shoulder at one of the soldiers, surprised to see a sympathetic expression on the boy's face. Indy frowned, wondering at the young soldier's strange reaction.

Dessauer was speaking again. "I am certain, Doctor Jones, that you would be willing to speak to me now." He paused, noticing the hopeful gleam in Indy's eyes. "However, I think you need to be taught a lesson. I will leave you here with your--shall we say--'companions' for tonight. In the morning, we will speak again."

"But I would not be so cruel as to leave you in the dark. Two of the torches will be left for you. And we will not seal the room. *Gemaine Fischer, Gemaine Mayer!*"

The two young soldiers snapped to attention; the second being the young man Indy had noticed. *"Jawohl, Herr Oberst?"*

"Fischer, you will take the first watch; Mayer, the second. See that the good Doctor is not disturbed."

"Jawohl, Herr Oberst!"

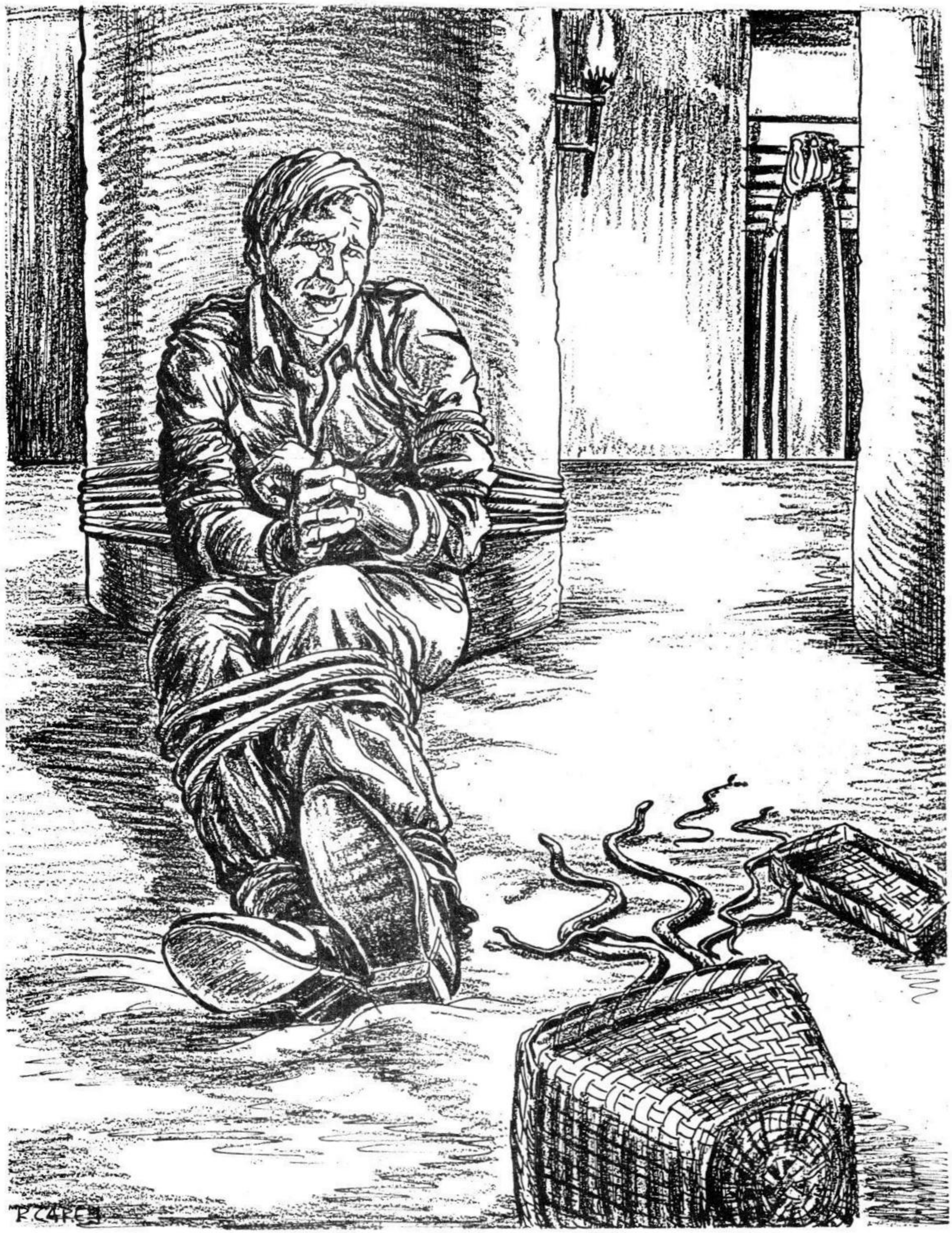
"*Gut*. Release the snakes."

Indy watched in horror as the lid was removed and the basket tipped over. Several snakes slithered out onto the floor and one began to move towards Indy. He fought the ropes violently, trying to break loose.

Dessauer watched him for a moment, then laughed quietly and left. Soon Indy was alone in the room with the snakes. There was no sound; Indy had been gagged again.

* * *

Arella studied her three companions closely. They all wore native dress; Marcus in robes borrowed from Sallah and Marion in some of Fayah's things. "Excellent," Arella spoke calmly. "Now--the three of you wait here while I


R.CAPES

deal with our 'friends' out in front. I will signal when everything is clear." She hesitated. "Sallah, what about Fayah and your children?"

He smiled slightly. "There is no need to worry. As soon as we leave, Fayah will take the little ones to her sister who lives in another part of Cairo. They will be safe there."

Arella nodded. "That is well. All right; wait for my signal."

She left the room and went back into the front hall, then stopped and took a deep breath to compose herself. She closed her eyes and began to concentrate. Her form blurred and gradually altered. Finally, she opened her eyes and looked in a nearby mirror, smiling.

Marion Jones' face smiled back at her. Arella was pleased; here was another talent she hadn't lost. Now to follow through with the rest of her plan.

She went to the door, opened it and slipped outside, peering up and down the street cautiously and ignoring the two men in the alley. Then she hurried off down the street, going back the way she'd come. She turned into the alley she'd hidden in earlier and vanished--literally.

The two Nazi agents had watched in some surprise as 'Marion Jones' had slipped out of the house and set off down the street. They exchanged pleased smiles and quickly followed the woman. This was the chance they'd been waiting for.

They followed 'Marion' without hesitation when she turned into the alley. Both men stopped in surprise and looked at each other in bewilderment as they realized that the alley was empty.

A voice spoke behind them. "Are you looking for me?" it asked softly in German. Before either man could react, a hand reached out and touched them both on the back of the head. The two agents collapsed without a sound.

Arella, restored to her own form, looked down at the two bodies in satisfaction. She was beginning to realize that she had more of her powers than she'd first thought. She dusted off her hands lightly and swung around to leave. It would be some time before the agents were discovered.

Arella stepped out into the street, stopped and looked around. Then she whistled: a high-pitched trill that carried over the street sounds. Marion, Sallah and Marcus came out of the house, waiting on the sidewalk until Arella joined them.

"Did you deal with our 'shadows'?" Marion asked.

Arella nodded briskly. "They will wake up with dreadful headaches--long after we are gone."

"Excellent!" Sallah exclaimed. "Shall we be on our way, then?"

He and Marion climbed into the cab of his truck as Marcus helped Arella into the back, settling herself against the rear of the cab with Marcus beside her. The engine came to life and the truck pulled away, winding through the streets of Cairo until they eventually reached the edge of town to head out into the desert.

Arella unfastened her veil and threw the hood back. Shaking her hair free, she laughed.

"You sound pleased," Marcus commented.

Arella glanced at him, eyes bright. "Ah, Doctor Brody, if you only knew."

"Knew what?"

"I am slowly discovering that I am not as helpless as I had first feared," Arella replied lightly.

"Helpless? You do not seem in the least bit helpless to me."

Arella merely smiled. Then the smile faded and her head tilted forward, her arms resting on her knees. The sleeves of her robe draped like wings about her. Marcus studied her, eyes narrowed; then he frowned. An image of the Ark flashed into his mind. There was something about Arella's posture that reminded him of the cherubim, an echo of their unearthly beauty. All his suspicions began to coalesce. "Miss Arella, how *did* you get rid of those German agents?"

She glanced up at him and smiled slyly. "I knocked them out," she said simply. "There are many ways to do it."

Marcus sighed and shook his head. "You live up to your name, Arella Samara. You truly are a 'guardian angel'."

Arella's eyes dropped. "I was," she said forlornly.

"Was?" Marcus' tone was sympathetic.

Arella looked up at him. Then, all at once, the words came pouring out. Marcus listened to her story, saying nothing. He sensed that Arella, obviously unused to human frailties, desperately needed someone to confide in.

Finally the flow of words trickled to a stop. Arella eyes Marcus uncertainly, wondering what his reaction would be. He smiled down at her warmly and put a hand on her shoulder. "I do not think you need to worry, my dear," he said reassuringly. "By your standards, you may be helpless; but we 'mere mortals' would look on you as something very rare--and very special. Your talents, limited though they may be, are still more than we may ever know."

There was a strange gleam in Arella's eyes as she looked at him. "You are a warm-hearted man, Marcus Brody," she said softly. "And generous. Indiana Jones is fortunate to have you for a friend."

"I would like to be your friend, Arella,...if that would be permitted."

"I would like that," she replied shyly, then she smiled. "Perhaps it will benefit us both."

* * *

It was nearly midnight when the foursome reached the camp. Leaving the truck well hidden, they approached the site cautiously. Kadin met them near the dune.

"This is my companion," Arella explained quickly.

The humans studied him warily. Taller than Arella, he had the same dark hair and gray eyes. He had, however, a more unearthly air about him. His eyes gleamed brightly as he looked at Arella. She returned the look sharply, then gasped.

"What is it?" Marcus asked quickly.

"They've moved Indy!"

"Where?" Marion said fiercely, fear in her eyes. "They haven't taken him away already?"

"No," Kadin's voice was quiet. "They took your husband into the dig."

"Why?"

"I cannot say...for certain. I think that your husband may have angered them in some way." Again he looked at Arella. After a few moments, she swung around and scanned the camp.

"Arella, what is wrong?" Marcus demanded.

"I am not sure," she spoke reluctantly. "There is no link... Come! We have to hurry!"

"Arella--be careful," Kadin said suddenly. "The danger will be greatest for you."

She nodded absently as she led the others away. They skirted the camp as quickly as possible, heading for the dig site: an opening in the cliff wall near the main encampment. Marcus and Sallah conferred quietly as they went. Their rescue plan was changing drastically.

* * *

Hans Mayer was standing guard at the entrance to the cave. He shifted uneasily, heartsick about this mission. The image of Indiana Jones' panic-stricken eyes, as the snakes had been released, haunted him. Dessauer was mad to do such a thing to another human being. There were other, less drastic ways to make the American talk. Hans doubted that Jones would still be sane when morning came.

The young German's thoughts were interrupted without warning. A hand came out of nowhere, covering his mouth, and he was dragged into the darkness. An arm gripped him tightly, pinning his arms so that he was helpless. He watched, wide-eyed, as a second figure appeared, hand raised to hit him. Then a third figure darted out of the shadows and caught at the arm of the second.

"No!" Arella's voice was low but determined. "Marcus, don't hurt him."

"What?" Marcus sputtered, dropping the rock he'd planned to use on the soldier.

"Arella--have you lost your mind?" Sallah demanded.

"No!" she replied quickly. She cupped her hands and a sphere of soft light formed. She held it up to Hans' face. He flinched back fearfully. "Sallah, see who it is?"

The Egyptian turned Hans to get a good look at him, keeping a firm hand over the boy's mouth. The grim expression left his face and he released the soldier. Hans glanced from him to Arella and back again.

"What...what are you doing here?" he finally whispered.

"Do you know him?" Marion asked as she joined the group.

It was Sallah who answered. "I told you about the young man who disobeyed Dietrich and spared my life--with Arella's help."

"Yes?"

Sallah nodded to Hans. "He is the one."

Marcus and Marion looked at the young man in surprise. Arella merely smiled as she let the light in her hands die out.

"We are well met," she said quietly. "Hans, will you help us again?"

He looked at her, a little frightened at the hint of what she might be. Then he drew himself up. "*Ja.* I will help you," he said in heavily accented English. His expression turned to one of concern. "You must make haste, though. Dessauer is...is *verrückt*!"

Hans reverted to German, unable to find the English words to describe what had happened. Arella listened to him in growing horror. None of the others understood what was being said, but Arella's expression told them that something was very, very wrong.

"We have to hurry!" Arella gasped finally, "Hans, will you take us in?"

"*Ja.* You must be quick though. My watch is nearly over and the next man cannot be trusted."

He led them into the cave. Marcus caught up with Arella. "What is wrong?" he whispered.

She glanced at him, then shook her head. "I daren't say. But I pray to the Father that we are not too late. If we are..." She trailed off and would say nothing more. The grim expression on her face worried Marcus. Something must have happened to Indy, something terrible.

They finally reached the chamber. There was little light; the two torches had nearly flickered out--another cruel joke on Dessauer's part. Arella's lips tightened grimly. She gestured sharply and the torches flared to life.

Marion choked back a cry when she saw her husband. Indy was pressed against the pillar, frozen in mindless terror. Several snakes were gathered around him, one coiled and resting on his legs.

Hans brought his gun up. Arella reached out to stop him and he looked at her in surprise. The outstretched hand clenched; Arella frowned in concentration. Nothing happened at first. Then, slowly, the snakes began to move. They slithered away, one by one, into a crevice in the far wall. When they were all gone, Arella let her hand drop and gasped weakly.

Marion ran to her husband's side with a faint sob and dropped to her knees. Indy still stared into space, his eyes blank. "Marcus, Sallah! Help me!"

The two men sprang forward. The gag and ropes were quickly removed. Marion cradled Indy in her arms. But there was no response. He was like a mindless doll. Marion looked up at Arella, tears in her eyes.

"Oh, God, help him! Please!"

"I cannot," Arella whispered, looking at them helplessly, "I no longer have such power." She turned away, unable to face them.

Marcus came forward and put his hands on her shoulders. She turned and looked at him. "You *can* do it, Arella," his voice was low, but firm. "You must! You are the only one of us who has the slightest chance of helping Indiana now. You have to have faith in yourself. There has to be something you can do; some way of bringing Indiana back."

Arella took a deep breath and bowed her head. There was a way, if only she had the strength. She offered a silent prayer to her Master to give her help, then looked up at Marcus and nodded. He let her go and stepped back. She walked forward and knelt, facing Marion. "Give him to me," she commanded gently.

Marion stared at here fiercely for a minute, then--reluctantly--surrendered Indy to her. She remained where she was, kneeling. Marcus rested a hand on her shoulder trying to comfort her.

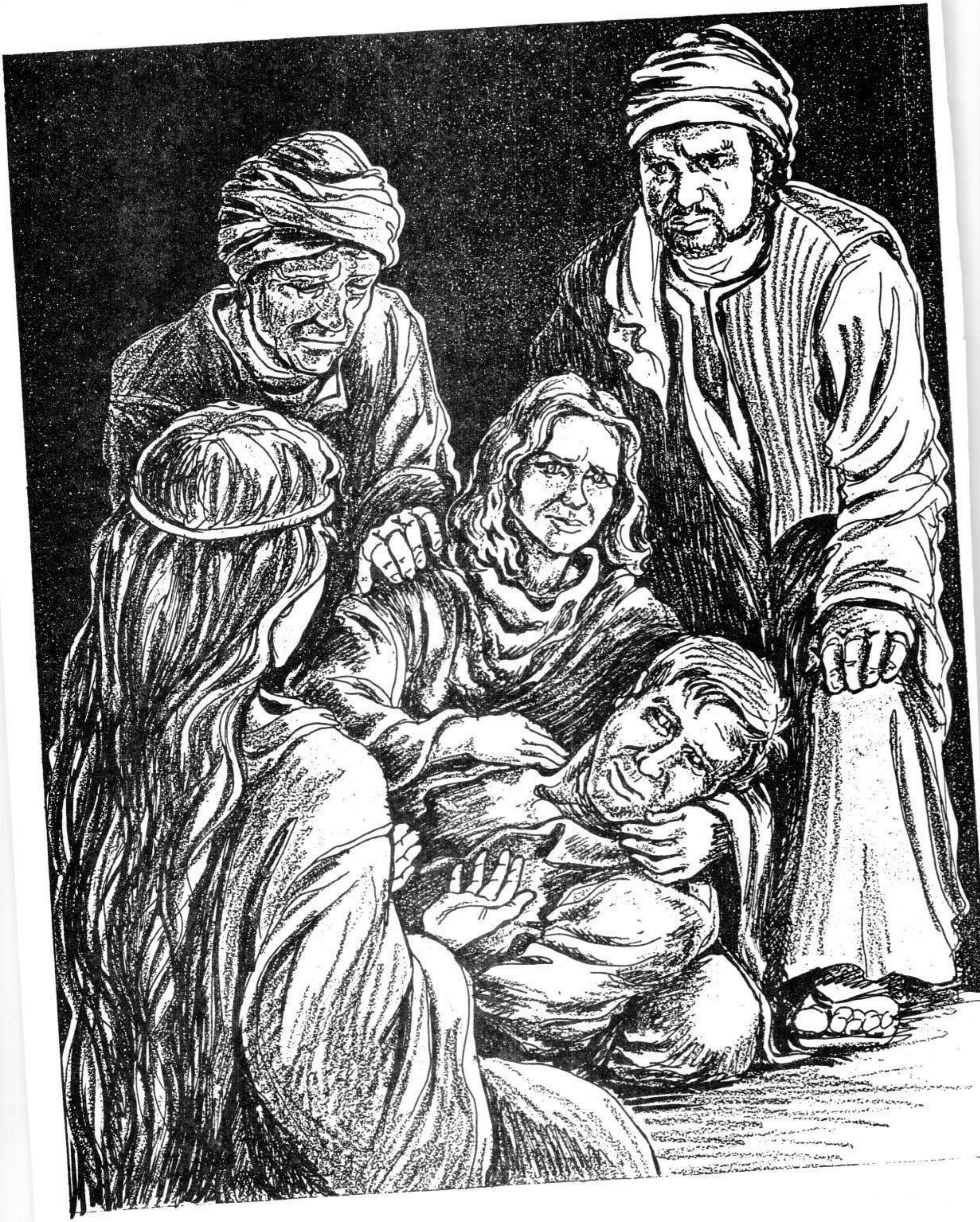
Arella placed her hands on either side of Indy's head and tilted his face up. His green-gold eyes were vacant; not even the faintest hint of recognition was in them. Arella bit her lip, then took another deep breath. She stared into Indy's eyes, intense concentration in her own. The light gray eyes began to glow.

"Indiana Jones," her voice was a soft murmur. "Hear me. There is nothing to fear here, nothing. There is no fear, no terror, nothing. There are only friends here, friends who love and care for you. Come back to them."

Her voice continued on in that low murmur, repeating the same reassurances over and over. The others were so intent on watching her that no one noticed the shadow that appeared in the entrance, then vanished quickly.

Time seemed to stand still. Arella maintained her gentle tone of voice, trying to call Indy back. But there was no reaction.

Marion's shoulders drooped. She was ready to give up hope. Then Indy blinked, eyes no longer vacant. He blinked again and looked at Arella in



bewilderment. She studied him intently for a moment, then broke the contact and sank back onto her heels, head bowed. It had taken all of her strength to bring him back and she felt totally drained.

Marion threw herself into Indy's arms and clung to him. He held her close, remembering a little of what had happened. Then he pulled back so he could see her face. "You okay?"

She nodded, smiling through her tears. "Indy, I could strangle you for scaring me like that!"

"Scaring you? What about me?"

She laughed and hugged him again. Then she looked over at Arella in concern. "Are you okay?"

Arella raised her head and smiled weakly. "I will be fine." Her voice was faint. "Really. It was a little...more difficult than I had expected."

Indy held a hand out to her. "Arella, thanks. I'll never be able to repay you for what you've done."

"There is no need to speak of repayment," she replied with a weak laugh, "After all, I am your 'guardian angel'."

Marcus chuckled and went over to help her stand. Marion and Sallah helped Indy to his feet.

"You are quite sure you are all right?" Sallah asked his friend worriedly.

Indy grinned. "I'm fine. But I'll be better once we're out of *here*!"

Hans had been watching the entrance nervously during this exchange. He looked back at the others. "You must hurry!" he urged. "My relief will be here at any moment. He must not find you here!"

Indy looked at him. He wasn't surprised, somehow, to find the young German helping them.

Arella frowned. "Hans--how will you explain this? The Colonel will be furious."

He shook his head. "Do not worry about me. I will think of something. Now come--*schnell*!" He led the way back out. Indy and Marion were just behind him, followed by Sallah. Marcus kept an arm around Arella as they trailed behind Sallah. She was glad for the support; she still hadn't recovered her strength.

They'd almost reached the cave entrance when Hans stopped. The others gathered around him.

"Was ist?" Arella asked in a low voice.

"I want to see if all is clear," Hans whispered back. "Wait here." He left them. After a while, he came back with a worried look on his face.

"What's wrong?" Indy asked quickly.

Hans shook his head. "I do not like it. Karl should have been here by now to relieve me. There is no sign of him."

"Maybe he overslept," Indy suggested.

"That would not be like him. He is *streng militär*--and he does not like me. He would come early to see if I was doing my...*dienst*."

"Well, we cannot stay here," Sallah said.

"We will have to make a run for it," Arella spoke quietly, "and hope that the Father is still being generous."

Marcus looked at her in concern. "Are you strong enough to try it?"

She smiled. "I shall be fine. Do not worry."

"All right," Indy said, "let's go. And everybody stay together!"

* * *

The rescue party halted just within the cave's entrance. Arella peered out studying the camp. Her feelings were the same as Hans'; she didn't like it. Everything was too normal, too quiet.

"Come on," Indy said in a low voice, "let's get the hell out of here!"

"Indiana Jones!" Arella's voice was indignant, but quiet.

He suddenly realized what he'd just said and grinned apologetically. "Sorry, Arella. It slipped out. Now, let's go!"

Sallah led the way, followed closely by Indy and Marion. Hans was behind them, his rifle out and ready. Marcus came next, trying to stay close to Arella, who was last. She just couldn't shake the weakness she felt and had difficulty keeping up with the others.

They were nearly halfway around the camp and beginning to feel that they just might make it when a sharp crack split the air, without any warning, followed by Arella's scream. Marcus, out of breath, swung around in time to see her fall. He immediately ran back and knelt beside her. Indy appeared at his side, kneeling and raising Arella into a sitting position against him. Marion was behind him.

"Arella?" Marcus' voice was low and anxious.

There was no answer. Her head lay limply against Indy's shoulder, her face pale in the moonlight and her breathing weak and labored. Indy slowly become aware that his arm, supporting Arella, was becoming warm. He pulled it back in alarm to find that it was covered with something dark and wet. He realized in horror that it was blood.

"Oh, my God!" he said softly.

The sound of his voice seemed to arouse Arella. She stirred, moaning softly, and her eyelids fluttered open. She focused vaguely on Indy and Marcus.

"Oh...!" her voice was barely audible, "I did not think...dying would... hurt...this much... I...I pity you...mortals..." Her face suddenly lit up with a brilliant smile. "Kadin! You came back!" she cried joyfully. Then the smile faded, her eyes closed and, with a sigh, Arella collapsed against Indy.

Marion choked back a sob and Indy felt his own eyes fill with tears. Arella had saved him at the cost of her life. He gently laid her back on the ground.

"What a pity," a mocking voice spoke behind them, "I did not want her to die just yet. *Anfassen sie!*"

Indy and Marcus lunged to their feet, only to be grabbed by soldiers hiding behind them. Another man came forward and yanked Marion to her feet, twisting one of her arms behind her back.

Lights were being brought. Indy searched for Sallah and Hans. They, too, were captives. Sallah stood quietly, tears flowing freely down his cheeks. Hans, on the other hand, struggled with the two men holding him. A third stepped forward and slapped him hard.

"Mayer, sein still!" he snapped angrily.

"Bastard!" Hans said furiously. "Karl, if I were free..."

One of the soldiers clapped a hand over his mouth. Hans subsided reluctantly, glaring at his tormentor.

Colonel Dessauer stepped forward to confront Indy, smiling unpleasantly. "So, Doctor Jones, you did not like my---hospitality! See what it has cost you?" Dessauer's smile grew. "One of your friends is dead. The others may be before much longer." He glanced at Hans contemptuously. "Our *verrater*, Mayer, most certainly shall die. He is a disgrace to his uniform. As for the other two..."

"Whatever you are going to do," Marcus said in a low voice, "get it over with. Your actions, sir, are without honor."

Dessauer ignored him, returning his attention to Indy instead. "Then there is your...wife. What shall I do with her, Doctor Jones?" Indy stiffened. Dessauer's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps I shall give her to my men." His voice was silky. "Or...perhaps I may keep her for myself." He eyed Marion suggestively.

"You can go to Hell!" she snapped furiously as Indy struggled violently against the men restraining him.

"Herr Oberst!" another man suddenly shouted.

Dessauer swung around. *"Was ist?"* he snapped angrily.

The soldier pointed to where Arella's body lay. The Colonel looked and his eyes widened. All that remained was a pile of clothing and dust.

"Du lieber Gott!" he exclaimed, "Where is she?"

"Right here," a soft voice replied behind him.

Everyone spun around. Arella stood at the edge of the light, clad once more in flame-gold, with a golden circlet on her dark hair. Her eyes glowed silver, but her face was cold and expressionless. A second luminous figure stood behind her: Kadin.

"The name of *Gott* sits poorly on your lips, *Oberst* Dessauer." Arella's voice was as cold as her expression. "For you have brought His wrath down upon you--and your companions." She gestured to the soldiers. "Release them!" The Nazis backed away fearfully. None of them thought to use their guns. It was obvious that no earthly weapon would affect these unearthly creatures. "Indiana, all of you, come stand behind me."

Indy grabbed Marion by the arm and hurried to join the two angels. Marcus, Sallah and Hans followed them.

"Your time of judgement has come, Gerhardt Dessauer." Kadin spoke now, "You have threatened those whom the Lord looks upon with favor. *And* you have dared to raise a hand against one of His favored servants."

"Your master awaits you, Gerhardt Dessauer," Arella's voice rang out, "You, also, Karl Altman."

She looked at her companions. For the first time since her return, there was a sign of warmth in her eyes. "Cover your eyes," she instructed in a low voice. "Whatever happens, *do not* look!"

Indy took Marion in his arms and she hid her face in his shoulder while he buried his in her hair. The other three men turned away.

Arella nodded to Kadin, when she was sure that her friends were ready, and stepped forward until she was a few feet away from Dessauer. Her eyes locked with his. "Vengeance is mine...," she spoke softly.

She raised both arms in a fluid motion. Her wings, of metallic gold, glittered in the artificial light. A faint humming began and the glow around Arella grew brighter until it turned to fire. She stood calmly amid the dancing flames. Dessauer's eyes widened in horror. He tried to back away and found he couldn't move. None of the soldiers could.

Arella dropped her arms abruptly, laughing softly. The flames around her faded and died. "No," she said quietly, "No. That would be too easy. There is a better way."

"Mercy," Dessauer moaned, "*Bitte,* Great One, spare me."

Indy raised his head cautiously at the sound of voices and peered at the figures.

"Mercy?" Arella's voice was harsh. "You dare to ask for mercy? Did you show mercy to Doctor Jones--to me?"

"What shall we do with them?" Kadin asked mildly.

"Let them learn what it is like to be helpless," Arella replied with a slow smile, her eyes not leaving the Colonel. "Only they shall not have the chance to escape--ever!"

Her partner laughed and Arella looked over at him. Their eyes gleamed as the pair communicated silently. Kadin nodded. "Yes. We could do that."

"What *are* you going to do with the cold-blooded bastard?" Indy asked curiously.

"He has been the predator," Arella replied calmly, "Now *he*--and the others--will be the prey." She turned to Indy. "You may watch, if you so desire. There is no danger to you."

When Arella's attention wavered, Dessauer discovered he could move again. He bolted wildly.

"He's getting away!" Indy yelled.

Arella swung around and gestured. The Colonel froze, unable to move once again. Kadin made a gesture now and Dessauer's body blurred and began to shrink.

"No!" he screamed, "No...!"

The cry faded as the human figure vanished. A small brown lizard cowered in the sand where the Colonel had stood. Marion gasped and moved closer to Indy. He put an arm around her.

Kadin turned. "Now, Karl Altman. It is your turn."

Again the angel gestured. And again the human form slowly dissolved into that of a lizard. Then Kadin made a sweeping gesture, silver wings flowing about him. Where twelve men had stood, there were now a dozen lizards of various sizes.

Arella laughed. "Let there be predators," she said in a satisfied voice. She clenched her fists and concentrated. A large falcon dropped out of the sky to land on her shoulder. Several snakes, including a pair of cobras, slowly slithered into the light. Indy shuddered at the sight of them and instinctively stepped back. He couldn't remember everything that had happened to him earlier; he still didn't want to be anywhere near snakes.

Arella waved a hand at the lizards, releasing her hold over them. The little reptiles immediately scattered. "Go, my friends," she said. "The hunt is yours."

The snakes slithered after the main group. The falcon spotted the lizard that had been Dessauer and went after it. The last the surviving humans saw of the one-time Colonel, he was slipping under a rock just as the bird made a dive for him.

"Now," Arella said, "we must clear the rest of the camp."

"You will not kill the others?" Hans asked anxiously. "Most of them are not bad men."

"I know that," Arella said gently, "I do not kill unless it is necessary."

"Omar--and the others--they're still in there," Indy added. "We have to protect them, too."

Arella laughed. "You have trusted me this far, Indiana Jones. I am *not* about to fail you now."

Kadin smiled. "We shall merely put the--'fear of God,' shall we say, into the remaining soldiers. They will leave the camp without disturbing your friends too much."

"Wait here. We will return shortly," Arella told them.

The two angels vanished. Shortly thereafter, the five humans could hear that the camp was in an uproar--to put it mildly. Screams, yells and other noises drifted over the ridge that hid the camp from them. Then everything was quiet again.

Kadin finally reappeared, a faint amused smile on his lips.

"Where is Arella?" Marcus asked quickly.

"She went back into the tomb," Kadin explained. "She said there was something she had to get."

Even as Kadin spoke, Arella materialized beside him. There was a mischievous gleam in her eyes and she held one arm against her body as if hiding something. The other hand held Indy's bullwhip.

"Here," she said cheerfully, holding it out to him. "You forgot this. Now--are we ready to go?"

"Yeah," Indy said drily. "But how do we get back to Cairo?"

Arella smiled slyly. "Perhaps we could use Sallah's...camels?"

The Egyptian flushed. The others looked from him to Arella in bewilderment.

"What *are* you talking about?" Marion asked finally.

"Nothing," Sallah said hastily. "It is nothing; merely a small joke. The truck is nearby. We will go back to Cairo in that."

He glared at Arella and she grinned back. "As you wish, dear Sallah. I shall meet you back at your home."

The angels vanished. Indy took a deep breath and put his arm around Marion. "Let's get out of here."

* * *

"Surely she should be here by now," Sallah said in concern.

Marion laughed. "I don't think we have to worry about Arella any more. She can definitely take care of herself now."

"That may be. But I would still like to know where she is."

"After all," Marcus suggested with a straight face, "being killed might have weakened her."

Everyone turned to glare at him. Before anyone could speak, however, a knock sounded on the door and they all tensed. Fayah looked at her husband nervously.

"Go to the door," he instructed quietly. "Find out who it is."

Fayah hesitated, then nodded and left the room. The others waited nervously, Hans reaching for his handgun.

"It is all right," Fayah called. She came back into the room, a smile on her face. A second woman, wrapped in native robes, followed her.

"Is that you, Arella?" Indy asked warily.

She laughed and removed her veil. "Of course, it is me. Were you expecting anyone else?"

"Where have you been?" Marcus demanded.

Her smile faded. "I went to the Nazi headquarters."

"You went...where?"

"You need not worry. I made sure no one could see me. And I learned a great deal while I was there."

"What are they doing?" Hans asked worriedly.

"Nothing at the moment," Arella replied. "They are still trying to find out what happened to Dessauer and the others. Before long, though, they are going to start looking for you."

Indy nodded grimly. "I figured that. We've got to find some way of getting out of Egypt."

"You need not look far," Arella said calmly. "Captain Katanga will dock here within two hours."

"Did you arrange that?" Marion asked suspiciously.

Arella shook her head, smiling again. "No. I cannot take credit for the Captain's timely appearance. Someone else," she glanced skyward, "took care of it."

She walked over to Hans and held out her hands. He hesitated, then laid his in them. "You must go with Doctor Jones and the others, my friend. There is nothing in Germany to hold you back."

"What do you mean?" Indy asked.

"My parents are *tot*...dead," Hans explained reluctantly. "*Mein onkel* chose the career *militar* for me. I did not wish it."

"We may have trouble getting him into the States," Marion pointed out.

Arella shook her head. "No. With your husband's and Marcus' connections, there will be no problem. If anyone says anything to you, all you need to do is remind your 'friends' at Army Intelligence about a certain crate in their warehouse."

"Is that what they did with it?" Indy demanded. "Top men, huh!"

"Indy," Arella said softly, "we do not want it opened. Remember?"

"Oh...yeah."

Arella turned back to Hans, smiling. "You are well named, my friend. You truly were a gift of the Father to us in our need. You will be rewarded for your kindness and mercy."

"Already I have been rewarded," Hans replied in a low voice, "I have met you, *Fraulein* Arella."

Her eyes shown. *"Verhehren mit Gott,"* she said and kissed him on the cheek. Then she turned to Sallah and Fayah. "You must leave as well," she said gravely. "Cairo is no longer safe for you and your children. Soon things will be even worse than they are now."

Sallah nodded reluctantly. "I do not wish to leave the land of my fathers. But I will go--if you say I must." He sighed. "Although I do not know how I will support my family..."

"Leave our home?" Fayah said plaintively. "What about our daughters, our little ones?"

Sallah drew himself up. "We will manage somehow."

"Of course, you will," Indy agreed. "We'll help you. It's the least we can do after everything you've done for Marcus and me over the years."

Arella nodded. "You need not worry. Everything shall work out." She smiled at the couple. "May your sons be as great-hearted as their father and your daughters as beautiful as their mother."

She hugged them both, then turned to Marcus. He held out his arms and pulled her into a tight hug. "I think that I shall miss you most of all, my friend," Arella said in a low voice. "If not for you, I do not think I would have had the courage to do the task set for me."

"It was the least a 'mere mortal' could do," Marcus replied, smiling warmly at her.

Arella shook her head. "There is nothing 'mere' about you. You are a great man, Marcus Brody, a very great man."

"Thank you, my dear," Marcus said and kissed her on the forehead. Then he released her.

At last, she came to Indy and Marion. "Well, my friends?"

Marion hugged her. "You must be getting awfully tired of rescuing us."

Arella laughed. "Never! Besides, if I do not do it, who will?" She snapped her fingers suddenly and dug into her robes to pull out a small, cloth-wrapped bundle. "I almost forgot! This is for you."

Indy took the bundle from her, eyeing it suspiciously. "What is it?"

Arella smiled slyly. "A little something from the dig. I thought you should have some reward for all the work and trouble you went to."

Indy quickly unwrapped the bundle, then stared at it in disbelief. A magnificent gold pectoral lay gleaming against the dark cloth.

"The color of Amon-Ra," Marcus said in awe, "I did not think it really existed."

Indy looked at Arella. "*This* was in the dig?" She nodded cheerfully. He sighed and looked at the necklace again. "Arella, how do you do it?"

She grinned. "I have a talent for such things. And...friends in 'high' places." She glanced skyward again as she spoke. The others winced and groaned.

"Arella--that was terrible!" Marion complained.

"But true," Arella replied, eyes twinkling. She stepped back, her face grave again. "I must leave you, my friends. Know this, however--should any of you have need of me, I will be there." She smiled again. "It would seem that you have been made my special responsibility, now that I am no longer needed to guard the Ark."

She crossed her arms in front of her and the native robes she wore began to blur. Then it was gone and she was clad again in the flame-gold raiment of her calling. She dropped her arms. "Farewell, my friends, for the time being. We shall meet again."

"There won't be any 'again,'" Indy said firmly.

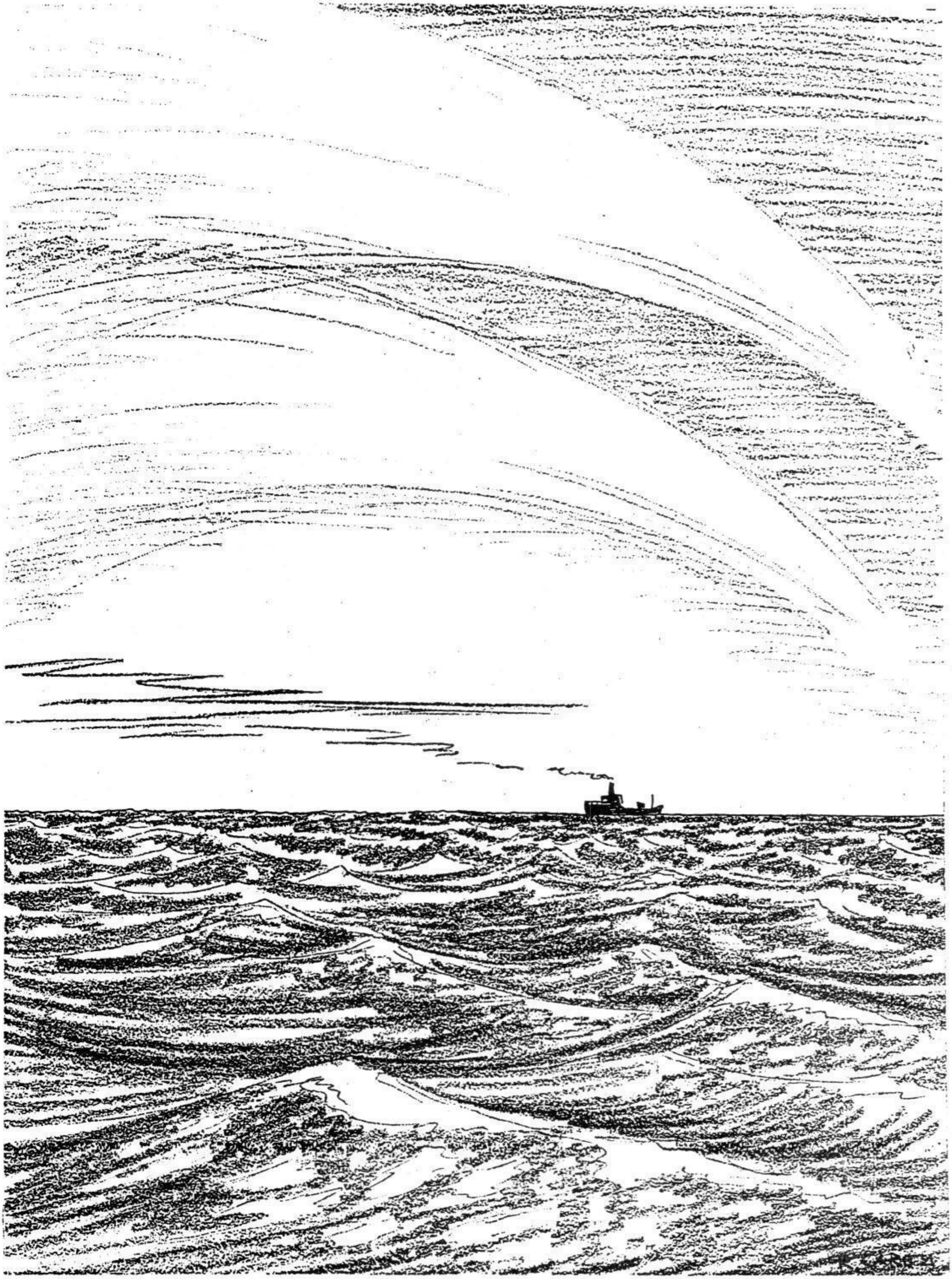
Arella's laugh rang out as she began to fade. "Do not be so sure of that," her voice echoed faintly. There was a flash of light and she was gone.

They all blinked as the light returned to normal. Indy looked at the necklace in his hands and sighed deeply. Then he looked at the others. "If Katanga will be here in two hours," he said quietly, "we'd better start getting ready to go home."

EPILOGUE

The *Bantu Wind* steamed along calmly. A pair of golden glows floated overhead, barely visible in the bright sunlight. They hovered over the ship and took on vaguely human forms.

"Well, Little Sister, our friends should reach home with no more problems," Kadin thought to his companion. "You have done extremely well, considering the handicap you were under."



"Handicap is not quite the word I would use," Arella replied. "It seemed that every time I turned around, something else went wrong. I nearly went mad!"

Kadin smiled. "Of course, things went wrong. It would not have been a true test otherwise."

"Test? Kadin, what do you mean by that?"

"Surely you have realized that you were not truly being punished, Little Sister. *He* would never do that merely because one of us dared to argue with Him. There would be few left to serve if He did. No, little one, He wanted to test your heart and spirit."

"He put me through all *that* as a test?" Arella was indignant. "And you knew it?"

"Of course. That was why I was sent to follow you."

"Of all the unkind, cold-hearted, fiendish..."

"Arella! Remember who it is that you speak of!"

"Not Him! You! You let me go through all that without giving me the least hint that it was only a test!"

"Would you have reacted the same had you known it was only a test?" Kadin asked.

Arella hesitated, then grimaced. "I suppose you are right," she admitted grudgingly.

"You know I am, little one. It *was* all for the best. Now, let us go home."

Arella shook her head. "You can go if you wish. I intend to follow them until they actually reach England. You do not know Jones! I shan't rest easy until I am quite certain that he and Marion are safely out of harms' way."

Kadin laughed. "Very well, Little Sister. I will go with you again. But we had better hurry. The freighter is almost out of sight."

The two of them reverted to their earlier forms and the golden streaks of light raced across the sky in pursuit of the ship. And they did indeed follow it all the way to England.

◆

ESCAPE !

Burning clouds of dusty vermillion,
Color my world and my thoughts.
Light in the sky can't touch my soul.
No warmth anywhere in this dark city.
Mocking store front mannequins are
More lifelike than I,
More fortunate.
There's no escape.

Factory lights struggle beyond the mists.
Square power,
Can barely pierce the haze.
Steel needles,
With no reason, random set,
Block me in.
There is no escape.

There's buzzing in my ears.
High frequency waves pierce the air.
Off-world blimps advertise pleasures,
Allow no privacy. It's a dirge sung for the world,
And no one cares.
There is no escape.

City dwellings are for the dead and dying.
Murky lights in windows crying,
For the dead memories.
Ancient histories lost,
At so great a cost.

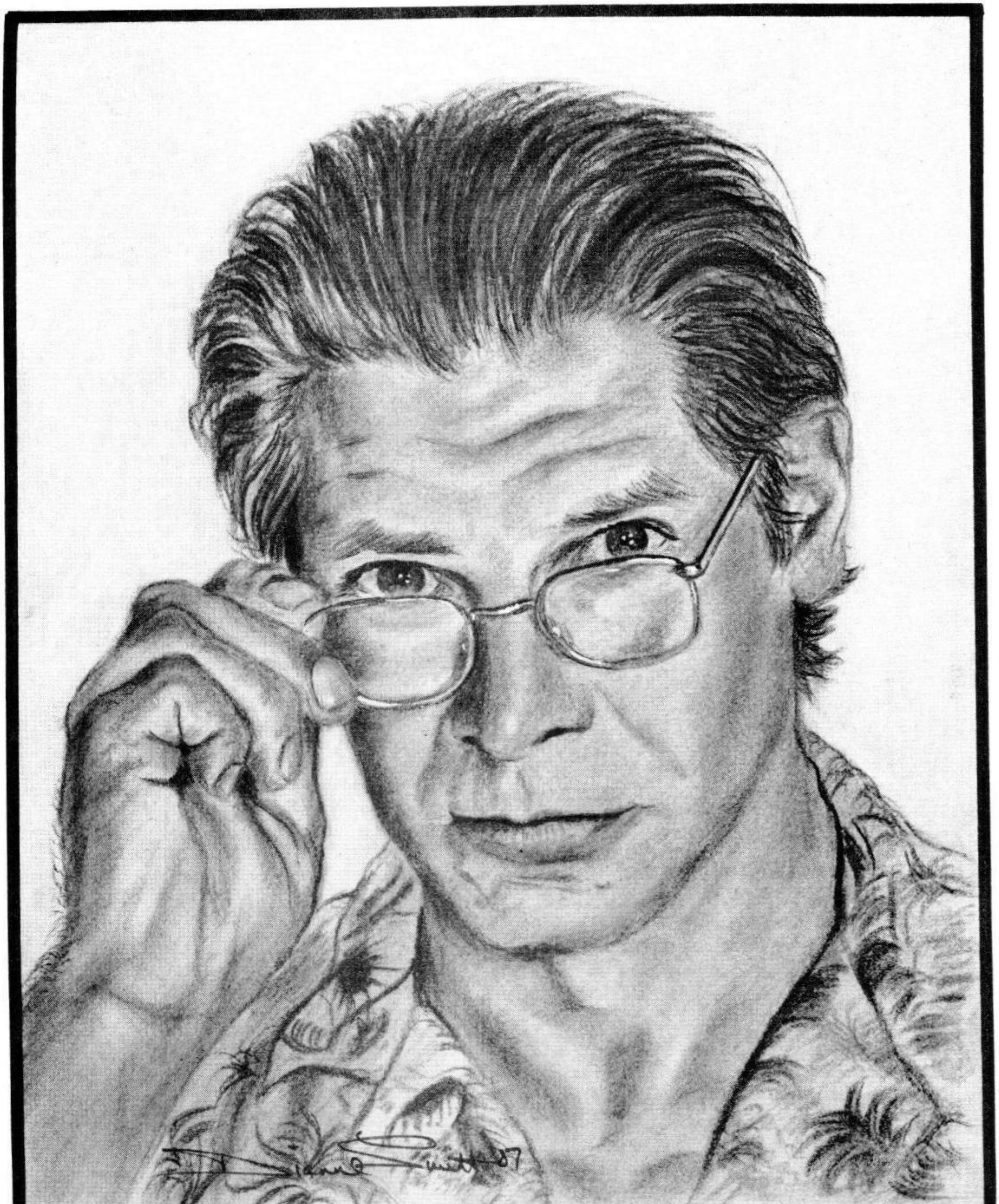
They say this place was beautiful,
Beyond compare,
A fabled Land of Oz.
Well, that's just a story.
Doesn't help to hear the past,
When you know you're trapped.
And memories are bitter. In my mind,
There's no escape.

Beth M. Lentz

Spinners screaming,
Sun barely gleaming,
A cinder in the sky.
Acrid rain permeates senses,
And never stops.
Neither does the city of teeming crowds.
Dirty, dark streets and concrete faces,
Granite stares and empty spaces.
No stops for the city, no getting off,
No escape.

Only way to survive is to bury feelings,
Become as hard as the replicants I hunt.
They seem more alive than I,
Like people burned out.
And all the rain falling cannot wash away the sin,
Of steel we've become.
Man's legacy.
The replicants understand, and they rebel.
Who can blame them?
The weeping city cries its tears. The rain is only wet.
It leaves a bad taste,
In the stinking remains.
The city languishes in sobs unheeded,
For man, replicant, itself--it doesn't matter.
There's no escape--for anyone.

Think I was dying with all the rest,
Until the Nexus-6 and Rachel.
"More human than human."
Voigt-Kampff denies it--
But could _I_ pass one?
Could any _of_ us?
Rachel--elegant and frightening,
Innocent strength behind helpless ways,
She seems more human.
Hard to believe she's Tyrell's creation,
But it doesn't matter.
Took a replicant to bring me back to life.
I couldn't help but love her, in my own way.
So I quit!
Got to start a new life.
Escape!
Together--And we'll never look back,
On the dark city.



Mosquitia

Mosquitia, imagine your creation green and gray
Look out on a hot solstice's day
With eyes that know the darkness in my soul
Sunlight in the hills
Highlighting the palms and blooming jonquils
Catching the breeze and springtime thrills
In the shade harmony in the growing jungle lands.

Now I understand what you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free
They would not listen, they do not know how
Perhaps they'll listen now.

Mosquitia, flaming flowers that brightly blaze
Billowing clouds in a deep azure haze
Mirror in Allie's eyes that glisten grey and blue
Colors changing hue
Morning fields of growing hybrid strains
Weathered faces lined in pain
Are molded beneath the visionary's driven hands.

Now I understand what you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free
They would not listen, they do not know how
Perhaps they'll listen now.

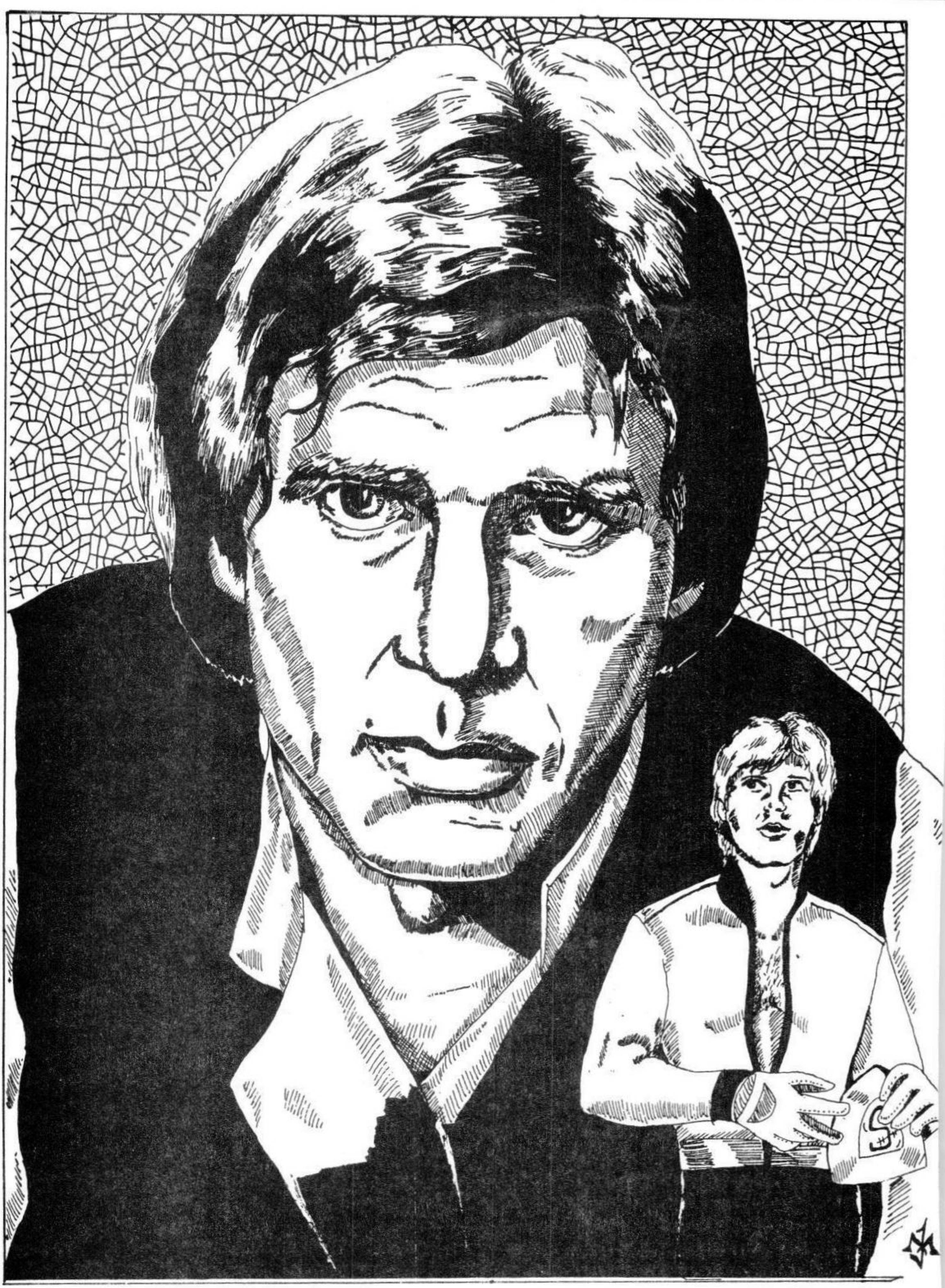
For they could not love you
But still your love was true
And when no hope was left in sight
On that dark Mosquitia night
They took your life as cowards often do
But I could have told you, Allie,
This world was never meant for one such as you.

Mosquitia remembrances...
Darken land that once was alive
Desolate by one's man's visionary sight
Lost to a winless fight
On a hope and dream that was wrongly right.

Now I think I know what you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free
They're not listening, they're not listening still
Perhaps they never will.

Debra Edwards

Adapted from "Vincent"
originally sung by Don McLean



THE OTHER SIDE OF THE JUMP

ILLUSTRATED BY

JIM MARKLE

Beth C. Masterson

Han spent the long hours of darkness giving his blaster a thorough cleaning. The snow and the bitter cold were bad for its components and frequent cleaning was necessary. It also kept him busy and his mind off his worry for the mauled and half-frozen young man who shared the shelter with him. And it kept away the memories.

It did nothing, however, to dispel the putrid smell that every breath brought to his abused nostrils.

Luke had been so cold and lifeless that Han feared he had been too late. There were small signs of life, however, and Han had done the only thing he could think of to warm the young man; he sliced open the dead tauntaun and stuffed the young warrior inside its steaming body cavity.

It *had* been a good idea, for Luke was still alive and his body temperature had risen almost to normal when Han had finished assembling the emergency shelter. But there was one small problem that had not occurred to him. When he pulled Luke into the shelter, he was covered in the blood and guts of the dead tauntaun and there was absolutely no way to get him cleaned. To add to the problem, the warmth inside the shelter was causing the mess covering Luke to decay at an alarming rate.

He had melted enough snow to clean the wicked tears in Luke's face and applied an antibiotic/anesthetic to them, but Luke's wounds were beginning to look infected and he started to thrash and mumble under his breath. Either the unknown monster that attacked Luke had very dirty claws or the insides of the riding beast had contaminated the wounds. It didn't matter which; the only thing that mattered was keeping him alive until they were rescued.

Han quickly reassembled his blaster and slipped it back into his holster. He placed a hand on Luke's forehead and was instantly alarmed at the high fever he detected. He'd already used all the medication that his small med-kit provided. Luke would just have to pull through on his own.

"C'mon, kid. Don't die on me. I couldn't handle that. Not again. Please, not again."

His last words, spoken almost in a whisper, were not meant for Luke. They were a plea, almost a prayer, rising from deep within his memories. It was something he'd never told Luke or Leia, or any of the other friends he'd made among the Rebels. Only Chewie knew and he never mentioned it; it was too painful for both of them.

They all knew that he'd been an officer in the Corellian Fleet. After all, he still wore the uniform, though it was stripped of all rank marks and decorations. But he had never told them the story of his court-martial and conviction and then escape from an Imperial prison and what it had cost him. This situation, so similar, carried his memories unwillingly back to that night so long ago.

He had managed to smuggle a message to Chewie and make arrangements for his escape. At the Wookiee's signal, he prepared himself and when the explosive detonated, he was under cover. Before the debris stopped flying, he was out through the hole in the wall, over the bodies of two Imperials, and into the cover of darkness. A soft hoot from the bushes to the left of the compound led him to his furry friend who lead him away at full speed.

"Nice work, Chewie. Another two days and I'd have been taken off Corell, headed for the Imperial prison on Manidor." The Wookiee howled his dismay. "Yeah, I know. We'd have never gotten me out of there. You've got a ship waiting?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I hope we've got time to warm her up. Those Imps won't waste time in coming after us. You only took out two of them."

"Hwrroowtfr."

"What do you mean 'don't worry about it'? You haven't got somebody waiting for us, have you? Dammit, you know I don't want someone else going outlaw because of me."

There was no time for the Wookiee to reply because at that moment a ship loomed overhead shutting out the moonlight. Han was hustled up the ramp and the hatch slammed shut. Chewie gave a mighty roar; the lights came on and the ship took off with a jerk that sent them tumbling.

By the time Han reached the cockpit he had a good idea who the pilot was and one look at the tousled blond head bent over the control panel confirmed his suspicions. "Sandor!"

"Hiya, big brother. Nice of you to join us. Now how about sitting your lazy carcass down and helping us get rid of those bastards."

Han saw the TIE fighters just as the ship lurched from a near miss. He sat down heavily in the navigator's chair and began computations to get them away from Corell. The destination didn't matter, as long as there were no Imperials there.

He worked quickly, cursing Chewie each time the ship swayed from another near miss. Why had the Wookiee brought Sandor along? He was just eighteen, the only family Han had left.

"C'mon, Han. We need those coordinates."

"Just a second." He manipulated two more levers. "Okay, punch it!" He felt the ship tremble and saw the stars start to swirl in the familiar patterns of lightspeed. They were going to make it.

But Fate had other plans. In the last split second before they left normal space, one of the TIE fighters fired a last volley of shots. It was a one-in-a-million shot but luck was against them. Han felt the ship lurch and cried out in horror as the pilot's console exploded in Sandor's face. A lesser explosion at the navigator's station threw Han to the deck.

A moment later the ship tumbled out of lightspeed perilously close to an unknown planet. Han stumbled to his brother's side as he dimly heard Chewie's roar that he was going to attempt an emergency landing.

Han paid no attention to the wild bucking and yawing of the badly damaged ship. All his attention was focused on the still form in the pilot's chair. Hesitantly, almost fearfully, he pulled Sandor away from the ruined console. He winced as he saw the mess the explosion had made of the handsome young man's face. As he was feeling for a pulse, the green eyes opened and focused on Han.

"Hey, big brother, I know I'm prettier than you are but there's no need to cry about it." His words ended in a fit of coughing and Han eased him gently to the deck. He wadded his prison tunic and placed it under Sandor's head as his brother slipped into unconsciousness.

He noticed the blood soaking the tunic and he frantically checked his brother's injuries. Sandor's face was burned and swollen and several of his ribs had been crushed by the force of the explosion, but there were no wounds that could have caused so much blood so quickly. As he leaned over to check for a pulse at Sandor's throat, a crimsom drop spattered on the young man's vest, followed by a second and a third. Startled, Han reached up and found a deep gash across his chin. A single glance showed blood covering his chest and the front of his white prison trousers. The sight shocked him into mobility and he ran for the emergency med-kit.

He treated Sandor as well as he could with the inadequate supplies at hand. There was an antibiotic and a spray for his burned face, but there was nothing he could do for the crushed ribs and possible internal injuries. Finally satisfied that he had done all he could for his brother, Han sprayed a liquid bandage on his own bleeding chin wincing as the blood coagulating substance entered the wound. He had just finished when Chewie roared that they were about to land. He cradled Sandor's head in his lap and prepared for the worst.

It was a rough landing; Chewie barely managed to keep the ship upright as they careened head-on into several outcroppings of rock and ice. When they finally slid to a halt, one side of the small ship was split open and the landing struts were crumpled causing the decks to slant at an uncomfortable angle. Chewie unstrapped and proceeded aft to check on the Solos.

"Did you have to land us in a Maker-be-damned blizzard?" Han shouted angrily. The wind was butter cold and each gust sent sleet and snow inside.

The Wookiee howled back that he had done his best and had managed to land them fairly near a human outpost, probably a smuggler base since it was hidden in such an inhospitable part of the planet.

"I'm sorry, Pal," said Han through chattering teeth. "I guess I lost my head for a minute. C'mon, let's get the emergency shelter built and get him in out of the weather."

It took only moments to build the shelter. Chewie carried Sandor in and laid him on a makeshift cot. Han sat with him while Chewie went off in the direction of the outpost.

Planetary nightfall was approaching when Sandor finally began showing signs of consciousness. He mumbled and thrashed around on the narrow cot. Finally, Han's hand on his brow seemed to reach him for his eyes opened and focused with difficulty. His voice was raspy and his breath came in quick shallow gasps. "We almost made it, big brother." He paused and shuddered as a sudden pain ran through his body. "Guess my luck just ran out. Tell Chewie goodbye...for me..." He held up a shaking hand and Han grasped it in both of his.

"Don't talk like that, kid; you'll make it. You're gonna be here to tell him yourself. Just hang on a little longer."

"No. It's time for me...to go...Mother's waiting...I'll wait for you... on the other side...of the jump." As his voice faded, his eyes glazed and his tortured breathing stopped with a long sigh.

Tears rolled down Han's face and he kept whispering, "Don't do this to me, kid, please. By the Maker, don't leave me alone."

* * *

"Han? Han."

The sound of his name brought Han out of his past. Startled, he looked deeply into Luke's clear blue eyes instead of the glazed, dead green eyes of his memory. He found he was grasping Luke's right hand in both of his, although he had no memory of reaching out and taking hold of it. He released his hold and ran one hand over the seamed scar on his chin.

Luke saw the movement and wondered, as he always did, what had caused it and why Han had never had it removed. He also saw the tears on his friend's face and knew that Han had been reliving a very painful memory, and wisely decided not to pursue it. Yet. He laid his head back suddenly exhausted.

Han saw the movement and placed his hand on Luke's brow. To his relief, he found that the fever was gone. He felt that Luke's mind was clear and filled with the questions that the young Jedi wanted to ask, and never had. He realized that once again he had someone who meant a lot to him. Someone other than Chewie who would understand and could share his grief.

He looked down at Luke and smiled. "Get some sleep, kid. It's almost dawn. I'm going outside to try and contact the base." He pulled on his gloves and hood and started to unseal the door.

"Han." He paused and Luke continued. "If you ever want to talk, I'll be there. Remember that."

Han kept his back to Luke, but before walking out the door, he replied softly, "I'll remember, kid. And you remember. After all this is over, I'll tell you the whole story. Just ask me about Sandor." His voice broke on the name as he went out into the icy dawn, but for the first time in years, he felt a deep ache soften inside his chest. He looked into the rising sun and said, "One day I'll see you, little brother. On the other side of the jump."

TO SLEEP!

PERCHANCE TO DREAM

Hamlet, Act III Scene 1

ILLUSTRATED BY
CHERIE FONTYN

Michelle Worley

© CHERIE FONTYN '87

A lifetime of memories, she thought as she placed the last jacket into the trunk. It was white, or at least it had been once, before the years touched it unkindly with a yellowish tinge. She ran a hand almost reverently over the still-soft cotton.

"You never told me you spoke my language."
"Only on special occasions."
"So it is true you found the Nurhachi."
"You know I did. Last night one of your boys...tried to get Nurhachi without paying for him."
"You have insulted my son."
"No, you have insulted me. I spared his life."

Laura shook her head uneasily, a shiver traveling down her spine. "Now, where did that come from?" she murmured as she closed the trunk lid. For not the first time that day she was seeing flickering images in her mind's eye. Images which she couldn't account for or understand.

As she sat cross-legged on the floor before it, the trunk seemed to mock her until she flung back the lid once more and pulled the dinner jacket from its resting place. Again the scent of mothballs assailed her, but she hugged the jacket to her and rested her cheek against the fabric.

"Where's the antidote?"
"Listen, I just met you, for Christ sake."
"Let me have it."
"Oh...I'm not that kind of girl!"

"Honey, what are you doing? Laura...?"

The images faded and Laura found she was still in the attic. She turned to answer Roger as he came up the ladder. "I was just putting these old clothes away. I'll be right down."

"Boy, cleaning this place out could take years. We should have had it all hauled away before we moved in. Why don't we just call someone...?"

"No!" she protested defensively. "We can't do that!"

Roger was contrite. "I just don't want you to knock yourself out doing this. That professor had a lot of junk."

"It's not junk," she corrected. "It's history." Roger laughed at her rapt expression and reverent tone. She shot him a disparaging glance and he laughed again.

"I think you've been up here too long and the dust has affected your brains. Why don't you come to bed?" He leaned over to grab her hands and help her to her feet.

"I *am* feeling tired. I'll work on this some more tomorrow." She allowed Roger to lead her down from the attic.

After a hot shower, Laura slipped between the sheets of the queen-size bed she and Roger shared. Fending off her husband's amorous attention, she rolled onto her side and settled in to sleep. Her eyes closed slowly, and before she knew it, she was dreaming...

In bed asleep, while they do dream things true.

Romeo and Juliet, Act 1 Scene 4

"Laura, come with me. I want to show you something."

Opening her eyes wearily, Laura found herself face to face with a stranger. Yet not a stranger. She reached to awake Roger, but the stranger stayed her, taking her hand gently in his. Suddenly, she was unafraid, and she felt compelled to rise and follow him. Hazel eyes seemed to burn into her as she donned her robe and preceded him out of the bedroom.

Once in the hallway, she turned to find him standing in the doorway, his glance giving the room a thorough inspection. "I like what you've done with it, but it sure is different. Softer." She thought he sounded sad, but when he turned, a smile touched the corners of his mouth.

"What did you want to show me, Indiana?" She stopped, confused. *How do I know his name?* She shrugged mentally. *I guess dreams are funny that way.*

He led her to the attic ladder. "It's all up there," he replied as he made his way up. She followed close behind him. Once they were in, Indy went immediately to the trunk against the wall and began pulling things out of it. Finally, he came upon what he sought.

"My favorite article of clothing!" he beamed proudly. "This jacket and I went through a lot of years and a lot of adventures together." Laura looked upon the ragged leather jacket and at the obvious ravages of time. "Feel it," he urged. "Go on. Feel how soft the leather is, how it's been worn down from use...*lots* of use." He pressed it into her hands and turned back to the trunk until he unearthed his fedora and his bullwhip. Pressing the hat firmly on his head and uncoiling the bullwhip, he began to demonstrate his abilities with the weapon. Laura jumped at the first crack, startled from her new-found interest in a jacket she had dismissed as trash.

Indy grinned wickedly. "Sorry."

"Somehow, I don't think you are," she bantered, handing him his jacket, and she was rewarded with a dazzling smile.

"Of course I am." He handed her the bullwhip. "Why don't you give it a try?"

Laura gripped the handle firmly and flexed her wrist. Again, she saw flashes of...something. Long ago fights, vicious adversaries, and hostile natives.

©CHERIE FONTYN '87

Indy, worried by her dazed expression, touched her shoulder gently.

"What?"

"If you're okay, there's more that I want to show you." When she nodded, he continued. "These boxes here contain some of the pre-Columbian artifacts I collected over the years--ones too small or unimportant for the museum to exhibit...or miss. Here."

Laura took the small wood carving of a head into her palm. She marvelled at the fine detail of the tiny piece--an ancient face from an ancient time. In her mind, she could see the jungle and hear the sounds of its denizens. She smiled, almost as if in memory, and she bent to replace the head in its box, lifting out another piece.

"That's..."

"From Peru. It's magnificent." Side by side, they went through several boxes of artifacts, mementos, and pictures. One of them, a picture of Indiana with a dark-haired young woman, caused Laura an unexpected pang of jealousy. *Why should I be jealous?* she wondered. *I'm a married woman, for Heaven's sake. It's a good thing I'm dreaming; Roger wouldn't like this at all.* She laughed out loud at her thoughts.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Oh, nothing," she shrugged. "What else do you have to show me?"

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes. Very much. I feel I could stay up here, with you, reminiscing forever!"

"You really see everything, don't you? You understand all of this; what it means?"

She looked up at him, her face a picture of wonder. "Yes, I do."

"I'm glad you let me share everything with you. I would've been disappointed to see it thrown away without forethought or consideration. These boxes hold my whole life. Somehow I knew I could trust you to take care of it all for me. Once you knew." He embraced her gently and placed a light kiss on her forehead. "Thank you, Laura."

"Are you leaving?" Her voice was heavy with regret.

"I'm afraid I have to, doll." His familiar semi-mocking tone was back. "I've still got a lot of adventures to enjoy before I settle down."

"Will I ever see you again?"

"Someday, Laura. Someday." Suddenly he was gone. As mysteriously as he had appeared, he disappeared. Laura ran to look down the ladder but there was no trace of the stranger.

But he's not a stranger, she reminded herself. *He's Indiana Jones, adventurer. Archaeologist. Friend.* A slight smile touched her lips and she turned back to the mess they had made in the attic. They had created chaos from order. *After all the work I did today, I'm glad this is just a dream.*

We are such stuff as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.

The Tempest, Act IV Scene 1

"Laura? Honey, where are you?" Roger wandered through the house, a puzzled look on his face. "Where could she have gone this early in the morning?" Birds chirped happily in the rosy morning light, and Roger returned to the hallway to call after her one last time. Noticing the open attic, he made his way up the ladder.

"Isn't it a bit early in the morning to be doing this? Haven't you heard that Sunday is a day of rest? For sleeping late...?" He stopped short at the sight that greeted his eyes. "Laura?!"

She sat sleeping, her back against a crossbeam and her head resting on her arms. The attic was in a serious state of disarray--old clothes and bric-a-brac were strewn about, and Laura had a distinctly dusty and disheveled appearance. Roger approached her and awakened her gently. "Laura, wake up."

She raised her head slowly and moved to stretch. "Good morning, Rog...ouch!" Pins and needles shot through her arms and legs as she moved. "I had the most unusual dream..." Suddenly, she noticed the cold floor beneath her and the absence of her warm, soft bed. She looked around dazedly. "Roger, what's going on? Why am I in the attic?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. It looks like you were up here ransacking the place. Are you all right?"

"I was having the most unusual dream. It all seemed so real." She stopped uncertainly. "I must've been sleepwalking."

"Laura, you've never done that..."

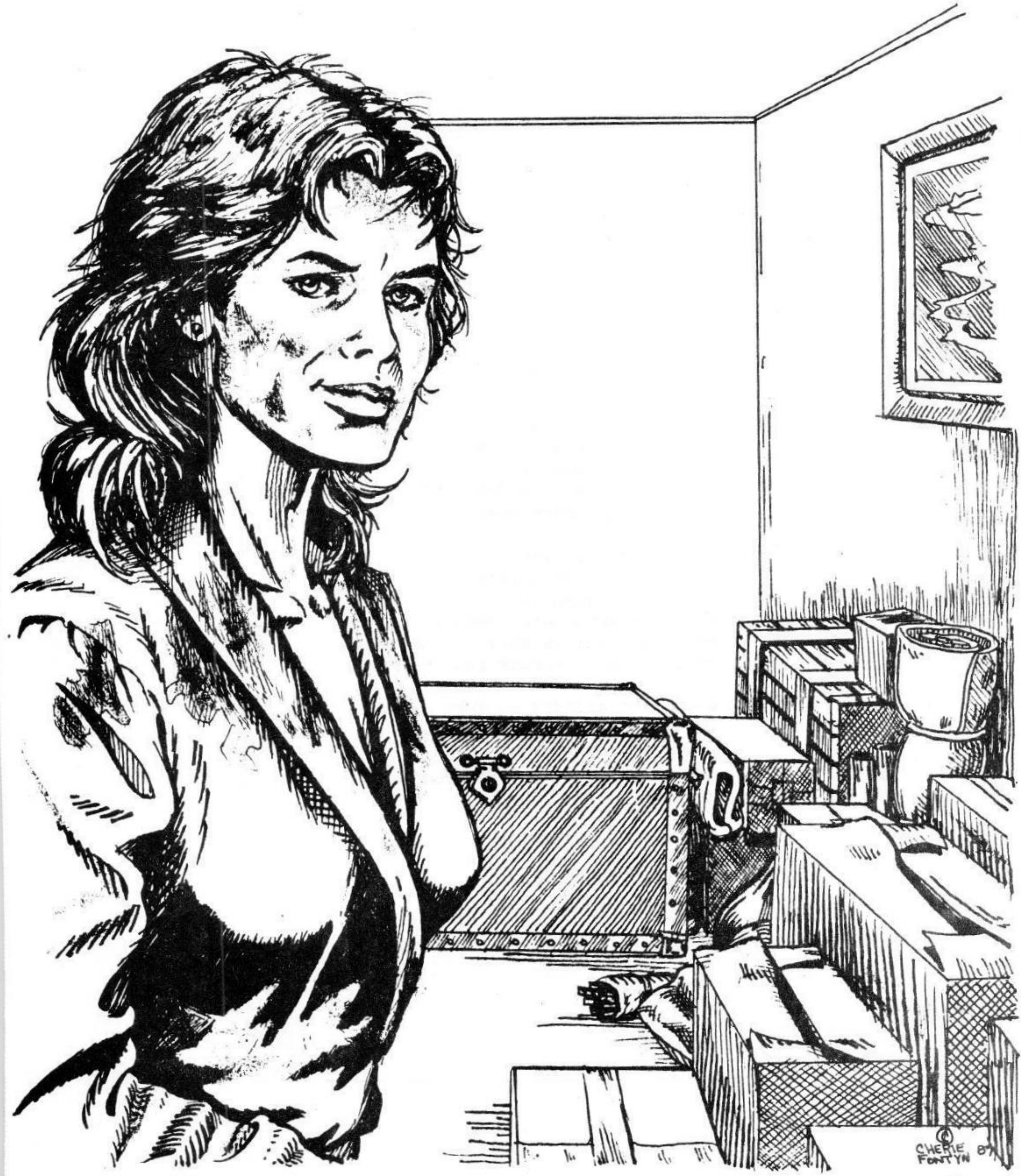
"I know, Roger. I know." Her tone was sad. "But I guess I've started." She paused and pushed herself up from the floor. "I'm gonna go get dressed Rog."

"Honey..."

"Look, let's talk about this later. I've got to get started on this mess. I can't imagine how I did all of this..." She began picking up relics and packing them into boxes.

"I thought you were going to get dressed first."

"In a while, Roger. I'll come down in a while."


©
CHERIE 87
FONTYN

Roger shook his head bemusedly and made his way down the ladder. Laura continued with her task, losing track of time as she threw herself into the work at hand. Finally, she was down to the last few things to return to the trunk. As she folded the last shirt, she realized that the trunk wasn't quite full. "That's odd. Last night there was hardly any room in there." She began rummaging through the contents, taking a mental inventory, when suddenly she realized what was missing.

A battered jacket, a fedora, and a bullwhip. A smile lit her face. She closed the lid of the trunk gently and made her way down from the attic.

CARBONITE ENLIGHTENMENT

PROMISES WE NEVER SAID
JUST LIKE THE WANT I SEE
NOW IN YOUR DARK EYES.
I'VE BEEN AWAY FAR TOO LONG.
SOME THINGS NEVER HEAL.

HOW CAN I TELL YOU
MY REUNION WITH CHEWIE
MEANT MORE THAN THAT
HUNGRY "HELLO" KISS FROM YOU?
PRINCESS JEDI IS WHAT I LONG
TO CALL YOU. PLEASE FORGIVE ME.

OPPOSITES ATTRACT SO THEY SAY
BUT I'VE BEEN DREAMING
FOR SIX LONG MONTHS
AND STILL CAN'T FIGURE US --
YOUR WAY.

NO, THANKS, PRINCESS.
I DON'T NEED LORD VADER
FOR A FATHER-IN-LAW
DEAD OR ALIVE!

-- *Marci Erwin*

EVENING ON THE WIND

ILLUSTRATED BY
JULIE B. JONES

Elaine Christiani

The sea was black glass, lit by a wavering ribbon of moon. Gazing sightlessly over the water, Marion leaned on the rail and savored her first moment of real peace since Indiana Jones had barrelled back into her life.

If you hated someone, you didn't think of them for ten years. You didn't remember.

To the end, Abner believed that Jones had stolen her virtue--when actually it'd been the other way around...her mouth curled wryly. Indy had been no virgin, but there'd been some gaps in his technique, things she hadn't noticed until Nepal. Noticeable, but forgiveable...

He'd found her in Nepal; he could have done so earlier. And when he finally showed up, it was for her medallion, a worthless (?) trinket she'd kept and worn because Abner had treasured it. Now it was Jones'. Everything of hers, everything she loved, he'd taken. And a few minutes ago, if he hadn't dropped off...

Damnit! Marion smacked the rail with her palm. Not again! She wouldn't play second fiddle to antiques for any man, *ever*.

She wrapped herself snugly against the night's chill, the tramp steamer's engines thumping like a great heart beneath her bare feet. Back in the States she'd collect her five thousand dollars, maybe claim her fried nest egg as interest. And then, so-long-Doctor-Jones...

That's what she'd do.

* * *

"Marion...?"

Indy yawned her name, rising up on his elbows. Greatly refreshed by his short nap, he blinked around the tiny, opulent cabin.

She was gone.

On deck, salt-laden air slapped at his naked chest; scanning the ship, sore muscles relaxed with relief. Marion was astern, wearing a thick blanket like a shawl, the hem of Katanga's gown whipping about her ankles.

Now they had time to talk, to bury the past (ironic phrase!) for good. But would she be willing? Did she hate him still?

JBjones '87

His fellow humans, with their pitiful lifespans and boring histories, rarely held his interest. Except for Marcus, and Abner. And Abner's green-eyed teenager...

I was a child, I was in love--

No, *he'd* been the child, an arrogant youth who'd scratched his itch from time to time but usually considered himself above that sort of thing.

With Marion, there'd been more to life than Archaeology. But after Abner's wrath and that awful, final quarrel, he had fled home to study elsewhere, to work, to accept his post at Marshall.

It was wrong and you knew it!

"Marion."

She spun, the blanket slipping off her shoulders; she jerked it up again. He stood very close, his back to the moon, his face in shadow. In his eyes, her tiny reflection was like looking at the bottom of a well. Or a tomb.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Walkin'. Thinkin'." Her hair blew back like a fragrant shred of cloud, night-darkened and blending with the sky, leaving her face bare. He liked its oval shape. A perfect, *freckled* oval. He smiled, helplessly.

"What're you smirking at?"

"It's cold," he replied, without thinking. Yet there was a wealth of meaning in the words.

"If it's cold, why are *you* here?" she quipped pertly.

Inspiration failed him. Marion wasn't a coed he could awe or a university official to flatter funds out of.

Then she reached for his hand, testing its strength against hers. The hands were alike, tanned and rough, unadorned.

Silently they walked back to Katanga's cabin.

* * *

The click of the lock sounded very loud. Slatted pale light patterned the walls; the stained-glass lamp cast its own muted glow. They faced one another shyly, a bit fearfully. A decade did not magically roll back. It was as if they had never been apart.

"I will if you will," she said huskily.

Indy didn't smile, but his eyes lit with a honeyed fire that took her breath. They moved together and shared a kiss that blended regrets with forgiveness.

The absence of fabric shortened and prolonged foreplay. Somehow, Indy maneuvered Marion to the side of the bunk. He spoke softly, giving her time to pull away. Going on would mean the end of their war, Abner's spirit laid to rest. Indy waited.

Marion's 'shawl' fell to the floor.

He put an unsteady hand to each of her shoulders in turn and untied the pink satin knots. The gown slithered down and light hollowed her body in ash and ivory.

Migod, more scars, Marion thought, watching him from the bunk. *Where did he get them?* She counted twelve, small white tracks in smooth muscle. None disfigured him. She loved looking at him, and flushed when a quick glance confirmed that he saw her enjoyment, and liked it.

Her pulse knotted as he swept her gown from the floor and dropped it over the lamp; then he was beside her, smelling of leather and salt and that unexplainable something that had ensnared her so long ago, and held her now. Her hate had been for the younger Jones who'd loved and left her at fifteen. This man was new...she giggled as his furred chin brushed her throat.

"What?" Indy asked, chuckling.

"Nothing, Jones--" And then he did something that would have shocked a Nepalese, and washed all thought away, including the one that made her laugh:

We've learned a lot in ten years...

RETURN OF THE CORELLIAN

Hey, it's me. Don't give me that look.
Okay, so I stepped on a twig.
That some kind of killing offense?
So toss me into the brig.

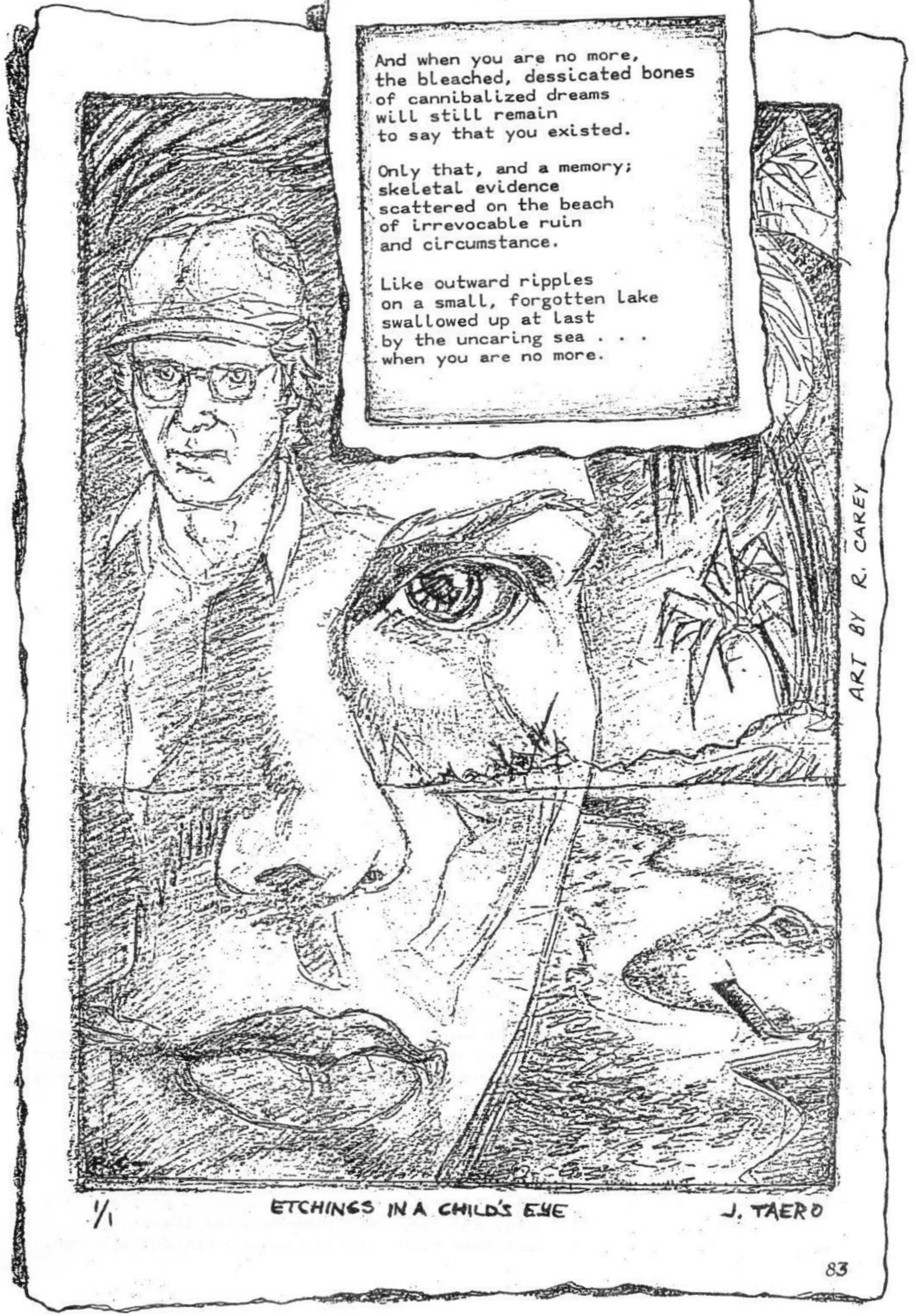
I know. My brain's turned to jelly.
I've been away for a while.
But, kids, look at the bright side:
I've still got a dynamite smile!

-- *Jacqueline Taero*

And when you are no more,
the bleached, dessicated bones
of cannibalized dreams
will still remain
to say that you existed.

Only that, and a memory;
skeletal evidence
scattered on the beach
of irrevocable ruin
and circumstance.

Like outward ripples
on a small, forgotten lake
swallowed up at last
by the uncaring sea . . .
when you are no more.



ART BY R. CAREY

1/1 ETCHINGS IN A CHILD'S EYE J. TAERO

WINTER DREAMS

ILLUSTRATED BY
JUDY LOW

Tracy Taylor

Leia Organa was home.

Mubarraz and Kytherion, Alderaan's twin suns, shone high overhead in a cloudless sky of gentle green. The light breeze that stirred the la'veeri trees stole softly through her hair, lifting it with unseen fingers. She felt a part of the day, of the landscape, and she looked it. Clad simply in a light green robe of Alderaanian mihar, her small, slender figure blended gracefully into the palette surrounding her: from the luxuriant garden that bloomed on either side of her, to the muted, weathered arch she leaned against, to the native Shaj stone that formed the large, airy dwelling that soared into the sky behind her, the ancestral home of the Organas was a study in greens.

And, like the garden that surrounded that home, the garden which had once been her mother's pride and joy and which she now tended lovingly, Leia had put down roots here. In the house she'd been born in, which had belonged to her family for over a century; in the huge garden her mother had designed and planted, full of thick hedges and secret ways that had been dear to the hearts of her and her childhood friends, and which contained Leia's favorite spot on Alderaan: the rock pool. A magical place, green-shaded and quiet, with deep, clear water so soft it was like a caress, the place had drawn her like a magnet ever since she was a child. Her father had explained to her that her grandfather had dug the deep pool himself, with the help of his neighbors, many years before her birth, so that he and his friends and their children could find relief from the heat of Alderaan's fierce summers. But that ordinary explanation had never satisfied her, somehow. She'd always preferred to think, secretly, that the pool had been created by the neelies, the mystical water sprites of Alderaanian legend. Leia Organa was a dreamer.

But today she was one *warm* dreamer. Mubarraz and Kytherion, almost at their respective zeniths, beat down on her head with more than a hint of the intense heat they would radiate later in the summer; and magic or not, that rock pool was just the place to be to get cooled off. She made her way there with the ease of long practice, wending her way through the garden along an almost invisible path out to its edge, where the pool lay, past the flaming beds of menentas whose beauty made them sought after on dozens of worlds.

As she passed them, nearing the trees by the pool, she saw a young neighbor boy, Kethan, splashing around playfully in the shallows at its edge, in the shadows of the smooth Shaj boulders her grandfather (or the neelies, perhaps) had placed there. Kethan's older brother, Mij, watched protectively from his perch on one of the rocks; and there was someone else there, too. Even as she watched, a sleek, dark head rose from the water, without a sound.

A neelie? she wondered whimsically. But then the mysterious figure reached out a hand, and a long, lean figure pulled itself up easily onto the boulder beside Mij, and she saw that the stranger in the pool was all too human.

Han!

Clad in the sheer, one-piece tunics her people wore to swim in, he made a handsome sight as he prepared to dive back in. She had to hide a smile at her own thoughts as she watched him from her hidden vantage point behind the flowers. He really did have a superb body, she noted, lean and muscular and trim; and the laisha he wore displayed it to perfection. She'd never tell *him* that, of course--he had a high enough opinion of himself as it was.

He leapt into the water suddenly, in an exuberant dive, cutting the surface of the deep pool cleanly, with hardly a splash. His gracefulness didn't surprise her. Despite her own oft-expressed derision, she'd secretly observed that Han was uncannily efficient at just about everything he did. She'd come to expect it of him.

Han surfaced near Kethan with a whoop, shaking the water from his hair so vigorously that the little boy was sprayed with it. He protested and Han laughed, and went under again only to come up holding the boy in his arms. His brother grinned in delight as the big Corellian threw Kethan up into the air.

"Ha, ha--gotcha!" Han teased, catching him easily. Kethan giggled at the smuggler's antics, unafraid, and Han tossed him up again, enjoying himself tremendously.

"A ride," the boy cried. "Can you give me a ride?"

Leia saw him grin. "Can I give you a *ride*?" he echoed, laughing. "Kid, you're talkin' to the pilot who made the Kessel Run in twelve parsecs! I give the fastest rides in the *galaxy*!"

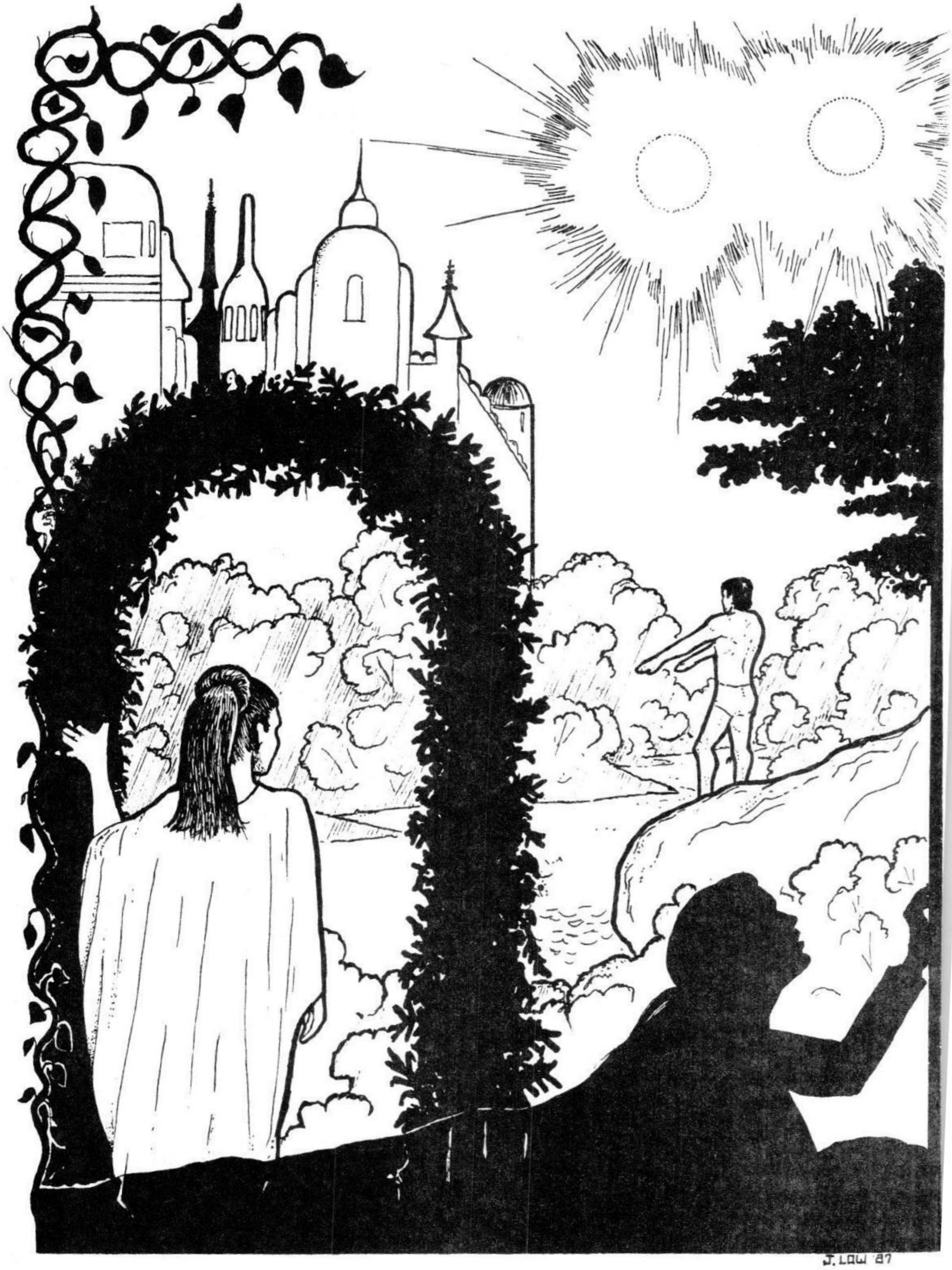
Leia laughed softly, in spite of herself. That was Han, all right! He never missed a chance to brag about that run.

As he'd promised, Han gave the little boy a ride. Taking him by the wrists, he pulled him around in tight circles in the water, faster and faster, until Kethan was dizzy, and shrieking with delight. She suddenly couldn't bear to hang back any longer; she wanted to join in the fun. As she stepped out from the shelter of the flowerbeds, Han spotted her.

"Hey, princess!" he yelled exuberantly. "Come on in! The water's fine!"

She didn't need a second invitation. She ran to the edge of the pool and reached out to him, smiling--

And woke with a start when her outstretched fingers collided painfully with cold metal instead of warm flesh. She blinked for a moment, disoriented and confused. Why was it dark and cold suddenly? The suns had been shining...Where was she? She groped blindly about her in the darkness, felt the coldness of metal beneath her fingers again, the slight roughness of an unfamiliar blanket--and then she knew.



J. LOW '87

Of course! She wasn't on Alderaan--far from it. She was on a Rebel cruiser in deep space, in the tiny, rather cramped quarters she shared with two of the other female Rebel leaders. That lovely morning on her home planet had been just a dream. She lay down with a sigh as memory came flooding back.

Pain followed hard on its heels, as if resenting her escape from it for even a moment, in a dream. Its cruel fingers gripped her heart as she remembered it all: her home, her family, her friends, her world itself--all gone, destroyed by Moff Tarkin in a single, devastating instant. She wondered, with the bitterest kind of irony, whether anyone else had ever lost so much in so short a time. That blinding explosion had seared itself onto the back of her eyelids, so that forever after, she could see it whenever she closed her eyes. She saw it now: that awesome, terrible flash of energy that had taken with it everything she had ever had.

Except the will to fight. Nothing could ever take that away from her, except death itself. Yet that very resolve on which she prided herself had hurt the one person she'd dared to love after Alderaan. Because of it--because of *her*--Han Solo lay frozen in carbonite, lost somewhere in the far reaches of space.

If he lived at all.

Leia swallowed, wistfully recalling the peace of her dream. The fact that she had imagined Han in her very favorite private place on her home world indicated just how deeply she cared about him. That pool lived in the innermost secret part of her heart--and so did he. Still, there was something about the dream that bothered her as she turned it over in her mind. Something to do with Han...

And then it came to her. She'd dreamed of Han *playing*; and that was something she'd never seen him do in real life. The only kind of games she'd seen him play were the life and death kind that had saved her life more than once--but they were not really games at all. Her mouth tightened. There had never been time for the gentler sort of games, not even in love. There had never been time for anything but killing, it seemed to her, since she'd met him. She tried to imagine him out of his scruffy smuggler's clothes, dressed up, sweeping her away on his arm for a night of drinking and dancing--but couldn't. Was that what this war had done to her? Given her tunnel vision, so that anything outside its bloody confines seemed unreal? Small wonder, then, that her dream seemed strange to her; such peace had become just a memory.

As had Mij and Kethan, both killed, along with so many others, when Alderaan was destroyed. Pain filled her at the thought of them, but she couldn't help wondering, as well, why she had dreamed of Han as a doting, fatherly type. An odd way to portray her sarcastic, tough, fast-moving smuggler. As far as she knew, he didn't have any brothers or sisters, or any family at all; and she rather suspected that he wouldn't have any patience with children. But she wasn't sure.

That was just it, she thought frustratedly; beyond his resourcefulness, caustic wit, and skill with ships and blasters, she really knew nothing about him. Not even whether he had relatives--and whether or not he'd be capable of paternal feeling was anybody's guess. Han had astonished her too many times for her to take anything about him for granted any more. And, what with all of the shooting, she thought wryly, there had hardly been time for her to ask.

But what a ridiculous thing to be worrying about, in the middle of a war, anyway, she chided herself. She tried to turn her mind to other things, but it was no use. Her heart tightened painfully in her breast at the thought that he might be dead; that the question of children might never come up, because--

With an effort, she turned her mind to a more positive idea concerning him: the rescue effort. In an attempt to atone for his aid to Darth Vader earlier, Lando Calrissian had traced the bounty hunter who'd kidnapped Han to Tatooine, Luke's home planet. But then Lando himself had disappeared, along with Chewie. She and Luke were going after them, of course, now that his wounds were healed, but there was no guarantee that they would find Lando, or Chewie, or Han--or that any of them were still alive.

But then Princess Leia Organa, formerly of Alderaan, had long since stopped asking the Universe for guarantees of anything. The destruction of Alderaan had been the terrible reply to the last prayer she would ever make. She had learned to trust only her blaster, and her fellow Rebels. The Rebellion had become so much her life that it was hard, sometimes, to imagine it ever coming to an end.

Still, there were times--when everyone else was asleep and she was along--when the faces of the Rebellion's casualties would come to haunt her, floating ghostlike in her mind. It was a part of the secret guilt she carried, a guilt whose existence she'd never admitted to anyone; but the visions frightened her. She'd killed many Stormtroopers, anonymous in their white battle armor, and ordinarily that wasn't so terrible, since you couldn't see their faces when you shot. But afterward--at night like this, when the visions came--she would see them, their helmets stripped away, their all-too-human faces revealed in their final agony...and many of them were so young! Hardly more than boys sometimes...

So, somewhere out there in the galaxy there were mothers who would never see their sons again, because of her; women who would never see their husbands... And regardless of her belief in the justice of her cause, that still sickened her deep inside. Worse yet were the faces from her own side who came back to mutely accuse in the darkness; faces of friends who no longer existed, who had died because she'd convinced them to join the Rebellion, their corpses the grim foundation beneath various Rebel victories.

And Alderaan. Forever and always, there would be Alderaan. The personal cost of her opposition to the Empire had become so staggering that she seldom allowed herself to think about it. But tonight it washed over her like a black, bleak wave. She felt as if she were drowning in it. She'd lost herself, the Leia she once was, perhaps soonest of all. The woman who'd been raised to revere life, the gardener with gentle hands, had become a soldier who felt almost naked without a blaster. And the destruction of Alderaan had robbed her of all else that was loved and familiar. Her home--destroyed. Her father, cousins, grandparents, childhood friends, her entire race--murdered. The bright beauty of her world, with its vast seas and silver mountains, was now just so much space debris. Forever lost. There was no one left but her to even mourn it, or to make songs of it--if she survived...

And, as if that were not enough, there was yet another cause for grief; newer, rawer, and somehow worse than any of these.

There was Han.

A smuggler by trade, he had had no interest in or involvement with the Rebellion until Luke and Ben had talked him into ferrying them to Alderaan--for a price. Price indeed, she thought grimly. If he'd only known how high that price would one day be--and that he would pay it. But he hadn't. He'd done his part, and to her surprise, even more. But every time his sharply-honed instincts had told him to get out, she and Luke had kept after him, promising riches, and trying to convince him to join up permanently, because their cause was right. At least that's what she'd told herself her motive was at first... She turned uneasily on her cot, thinking about it. Had she really wanted him for his leadership abilities, or had she secretly wanted the man himself--even at the first?

Han's motives hadn't always been clear either. In the beginning, he'd helped them out of greed; then later, out of his growing affection for Luke. But later still...

He'd stayed with them for her sake. He'd never said so, of course; he would've died rather than admit it. But his refusal to leave Hoth, despite the great danger, without first making sure of her safety, despite their nasty argument--*that* had spoken louder than words. So had his kisses, with their tenderness that had surprised her so much at first. His gentleness with her contradicted the impression he tried too hard to give of utter selfishness.

But his mercenary words were undermined by their first kiss; she hadn't been the only one who was trembling at that caress. It had just taken her awhile to see the caring beneath his flippant words, the decency he cloaked with sarcasm. And it had taken her entirely too long to realize just how much she loved him, and what that love had done to him. It would've been a thousand times better for him, she thought bitterly, if he'd left her and the Rebellion far behind, as he'd so often meant to do. Tried to do--

But she'd always stopped him.

Maybe that was why his plight hurt so much--almost more than the loss of a whole world. *Because she was responsible for it.* Alderaan's fate had not been in her hands; indeed, she'd been willing to betray the Rebellion to save it. But she'd known what she was doing with Han; and if he was dead, who was to say that she hadn't killed him, just as surely as if she'd been the Dark Lord herself?

The Empire has its Dark Lord, she thought grimly, *the Rebellion its Princess; and whose hands will be bloodier in the end?*

She swallowed hard, telling herself that self-pity was a waste of time, that it led to madness; but it was no use. Perhaps she was mad already, for she couldn't get the faces of the dead out of her mind: Kethan; Mij; her father; Han; Teli Drios, killed on Hoth; little Manda Routh, friend of her childhood, felled by a Stormtrooper's blaster on Procyon; Hu'Ast; Chi Thras; Pel Doorun... So many!

"Enough!" she wanted to scream. "NO MORE DEATH!" But the deaths wouldn't stop until the war was over--she knew that. But she was her father's daughter, and when there was nothing else left in the Universe to hang onto, she remembered that, and him. She was an Organa and Organas did not go mad, no matter what life threw at them. She had to survive now, for all of them. So Leia did not scream. Not even a single sob disturbed the sleep of the Rebel officers who lay so close to her.

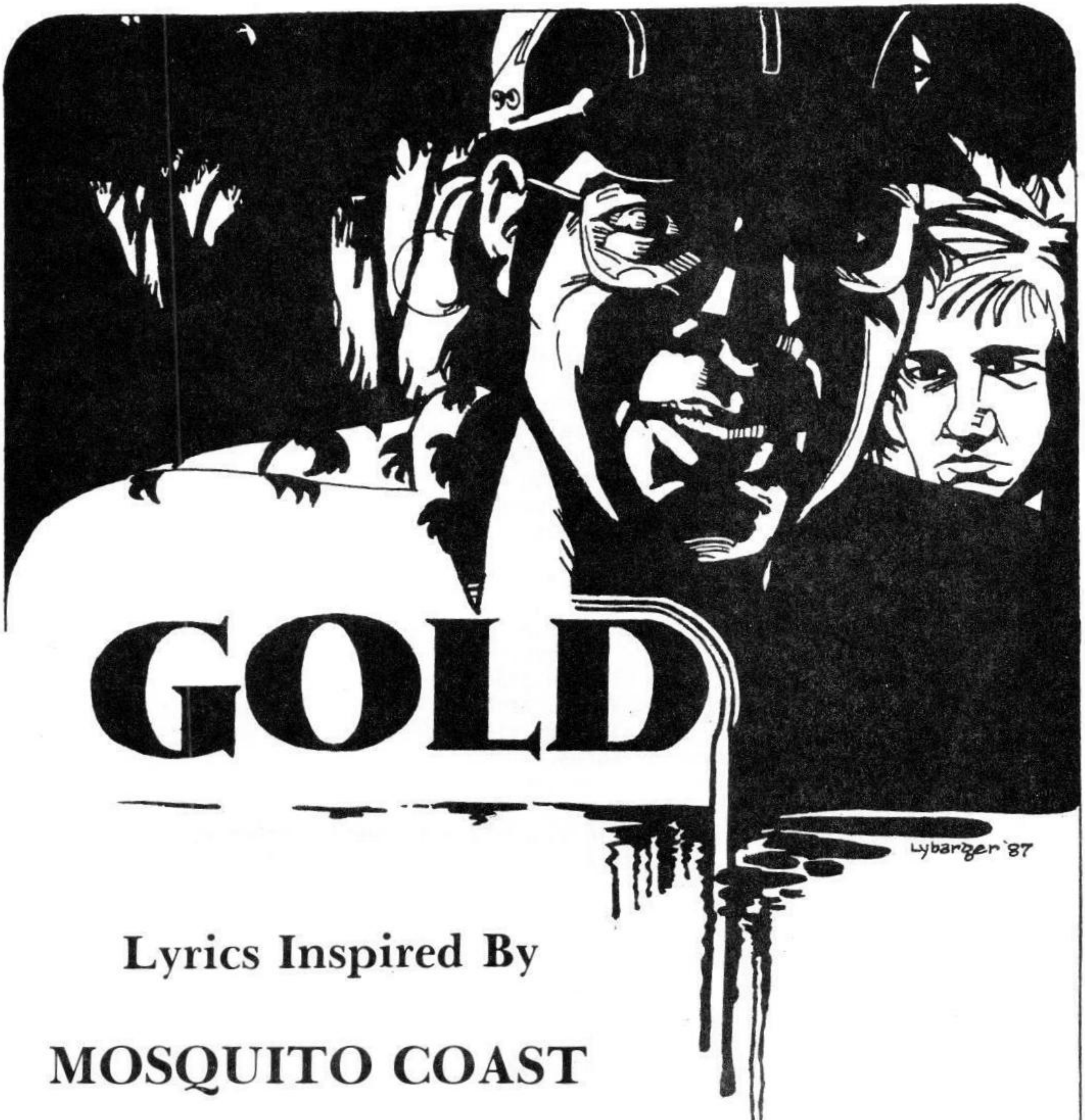
"Han," was all she whispered, almost soundlessly. "Han..."

And the name was grief and love and hope and iron-hard resolve, and she repeated it over and over to herself, like a chant, or a kind of prayer. And if some very unmilitary tears trickled from her eyes as she did, no one ever knew. It was very dark inside their quarters, and all the others were asleep, lost in such dreams as soldiers have.

resumé

A replicant hunter named Deckard
Had a past, shall we say, that was checkered.
For he'd shared stolen bliss
With a lab-cultured miss,
Which put quite a blot on his record.

cypher



GOLD

Lyrics Inspired By

MOSQUITO COAST

COMPOSED AND WRITTEN BY

Martie O'Brien

ILLUSTRATED BY

Wanda Lybarger

Technoplot

Formica and Congoleum
And Melamine, petroleum
In margarine and cans of cheese
At Howard Johnson's, Dairy Freeze,
And cantaloupes are overprice
They freeze your water, sell you ice.
The scientists are full of crap;
They're gonna blow us off the map.
While people sit in Sunday pews
Instead of paying moral dues.

You want to buy a frying pan?
They're all from China or Japan.
Your cars and trucks and shoes and clothes
Are made by Gooks and Eskimos,
And everything from kitchen gadgets --
Pliers, wrenches, saws and ratchets,
Snowmobiles -- they all come via
Taiwan, Hong Kong or Korea.
You could do away with graves --
Use your G.E. microwaves.
   There's blight out in suburbia and creeping urban rot
   And it's a tech, tech, tech, tech, Techno-Plot.

Chemicals in tangerines
And porno in the magazines.
Prosperity is an illusion.
Want insight? You get confusion.
Dow, Monsanto, G.M.C.
Are sticking it to you and me.
Been doing it for generations --
Killing us with corporations.
Math gives way to fingerpaint,
And self-sufficiency is quaint.

And nothing in the U.S.A.
Is worth the price you have to pay.
The media is all pernicious
Reasoning is addled, specious.
There's more nutrition in the sack
Than in your carryout Big Mac.
Television's trash and lies
And films destroy your mind and eyes.
Johnny can't read, Johnny's spastic --
Kid's been raised on crud and plastic.
   The air is full of acid rain; the schools are full of pot.
   And it's a tech, tech, tech, tech, Techno-Plot.

Your housewife is a staunch admirer
Of the National Enquirer.
Corporate payroll's full of crooks
And authors don't write decent books.
The art of creative invention
Dies and no one pays attention.
Politicians line their pockets
Making piles of killing rockets,
Give our grain away to Guam
While they get set to drop the bomb.

War is coming everywhere
While we spray Freon on our hair.
The dollar's hardly worth a quarter.
Time is short and getting shorter.
There's no way of circumventing --
Progress keeps on unrelenting.
Things go down from bad to worse;
They always kill the smart ones first.
It's not enough to get ahead --
You got to get out or you're dead.
   You put it all together and you know what you got?
   You got a tech, tech, tech, tech, Techno-Plot.

Gold

Living on dreams is a popular pastime,
Betting on the Cosmic Wheel,
Looking for Luck and following rainbows,
Making that one big deal.
Searching for riches in all the wrong places,
Trying to beat the Eternal Odds,
And the music you hear while you're running after
Is the malicious laughter of gods.

Gold is a pleasure, the greatest one known.
You don't dig for this treasure, cut it out of the stone.
Gold doesn't glitter and gold doesn't shine --
It's a fata morgana; it's a state of mind.

You can go courtin' Old Lady Fortune
And dance with her daughters 'til dawn.
At the sign of the sun all the dancing is done
And you know that they've been putting you on.
You can go dive for doubloons in the water
Or sit in the pit with your stocks.
You sell and you buy 'til the day that you die,
Either way, you wind up in a box.

Gold is a pleasure, the greatest one known.
You don't dig for this treasure, cut it out of the stone.
Gold doesn't glitter and gold doesn't shine --
It's a fata morgana; it's a state of mind.

Beaches can beckon with welcoming glitter,
Shining with shell-gristed sand.
Mangoes, papayas, bananas are burnished;
The sun is a coin in your hand.
Yellow and flowing, the hair of a lover,
The shade of a bright autumn grove.
But treasure most precious is seeing your wishes
Turn into your own private trove.

Gold is a pleasure, the greatest one known.
You don't dig for this treasure, cut it out of the stone.
Gold doesn't glitter, and gold doesn't shine,
It's a fata morgana; it's a state of mind.

Family

God shows his displeasure
With a temporal display.
Some put their hands together
Fall down on their knees and pray
Some ignore the warning
Some laugh at the sky,
They can whistle down the wind if they try.

Thunder and lightning and rain on the sea
Hold on to each other, be as strong as you can be.
Hold on to each other, make a human chain,
And you might stop the lightning, you might slow down the rain.
A solitary sailor's skirting Eternity --
You've got to have a family.

Don't let fear confound you,
Don't be held back by doubt
Hesitation wastes your time,
And fear will find you out.
You can ride out any storm
And handle heavy weather
If you have the strength to stand together.

Thunder and lightning and rain on the sea.
Hold on to each other, be as strong as you can be.
Hold on to each other, make a human chain
And you might stop the lightning, you might slow down the rain.
A solitary sailor's skirting Eternity.
You've got to have a family.

Bring It On Home

When you're down and all alone
And your sun don't shine no more
And the world has gone around too many times,
And the doors just keep on closing
And you can't find the key,
Honey, bring it on home,
Bring it on home to me.

I've got time and I've got caring,
I've got everything you need,
Let me rock you on the sea of easy dreams.
Let my love surround you
And hold you endlessly,
Honey, bring it on home,
Bring it on home to me.

Bring all your burdens,
Bring all your heartaches,
Bring all your loneliness and pain.
I will be here and my love will set you free,
Honey, bring it on home,
Bring it on home to me.

Tell me when you're hurting,
Tell me when you cry
Tell me when your dreams have let you down.
I will understand,
Just trust me and you'll see,
Honey, bring it on home,
Bring it on home to me.

Bring all your burdens,
Bring all your heartaches,
Bring all your loneliness and pain.
I will be here and my love will set you free.
Honey, bring it on home,
Bring it on home to me.

The Reach

May you always be a step behind your visions.
And may you never feed the hunger in your eyes.
May you never see your face in the mirror of your mind, without disguise.
May you climb the mountain, never reaching the peak.
May you spend your life looking, and never find what you seek.

May you always keep dreaming of tomorrow.
May you always keep following after your star.
May you never slow down long enough to find out just who you are.
Like a knight in armor, may you search for your Grail.
And whatever you search for, I mercifully pray you will fail.

> May you sail on the water, never finding the beach.
> May the grasp of your hunger never outrun the reach.

The darkness is waiting for you, at the end of your travels.
The shadows will find you, if ever you reach your goal.
Your summer spirit will turn, in a moment, to the winter of your soul.
When you have run your race, that's when you fall.
Your hands are empty; you find you got nothing at all.

So, Darling, forgive me, and please understand:
The treasures you'd die for, I know, are better off lost.
I love you too much to hope that you'll burn
With the light that comes when you learn
There's too great a cost.
If you have everything, you'll always need more.
So may you never find what you're looking for.

> May you sail on the water, never finding the beach.
> May the grasp of your hunger never outrun the reach.

> May you sail on the water, never finding the beach.
> May the grasp of your hunger never outrun the reach.

Primitive Priority

It must be Primitive Priority --
This insistence on your property.
Father come and take the boat away,
But me, I gotta do what Father say.
Boat is only thing I ever had
Nothin' good would come of gettin' mad.
Got to have a good philosophy.
One day boat be coming back to me.

Everything that glitter is tomorrow's dreams,
But only bitter water come from sorrowful streams,
So I don't worry 'bout tomorrow at all.

It must be Primitive Priority --
This insistance on identity.
Shouldn't matter what you call a man,
Long as he comes fast as he can.
Father give whatever name he choose.
Who care? Only man whose name he lose.
Day go down, I watch the settin' sun.
No more trouble, what's done is done.

Everything that glitter is tomorrow's dreams,
But only bitter water come from sorrowful streams,
So I don't worry 'bout tomorrow at all.

It must be Primitive Priority,
To have no uses for authority.
Father good at layin' down the law
'Bout the smartest man I ever saw.
Father go along his lonely way,
I shut my mouth, I got nothin' to say.
God know, I am just a simple man;
Sometime I see more than Father can.

Everything that glitter is tomorrow's dreams,
But only bitter water come from sorrowful streams,
So I don't worry 'bout tomorrow at all.

One Of These Days

The answer to my secret prayer
Would be to finally settle down somewhere,
Somewhere I could put my feet up and stay awhile.
Never stayed in one town long,
Is there anywhere that I belong?
Nothing's there when I look back over the miles.
Just a series of places,
The memory of faces
That fade into the mist behind ...
I'll make a castle in my mind.

I'll make a home away from home.
I'll make a shelter from the wind and weather.
I'll make a home away from home,
'Til me and my home come together, one of these days.

I want a house that I can call my own,
Not somebody else's just on loan.
I want to feel the floor and touch the walls with my hand.
When tomorrow comes around at dawn,
Will I be here or will I be gone?
I've been flying too long, now I'm ready to land.
I want to stay on the ground,
I want to nail it down,
But the scenery won't stand still.
And if it won't, then I guess I will ...

I'll make a home away from home.
I'll make a shelter from the wind and weather.
I'll make a home away from home
'Til me and my home come together, one of these days.

One of these days, one of these days ...

See How She Rains

Big Sky Sister,
Up above my head
Close down your all-seeing eye,
Scatter pillows on your bed.
Brother Sun has gone away
Let the shadow curtain fall,
Lady, weep, and go to sleep
Along the mountain wall.
   And see how she rains, Lord,
   See how she rains.

Night is my companion,
Quiet, dark-eyed friend
Send the mist to comfort me
Around the river bend.
Make a cloak to cover me
And hide me from the moon,
Lady, stay, don't go away,
The dawn is coming soon.
   And see how she rains, Lord,
   See how she rains.

Silver weed-hair woman
Patient in the pool,
Whisper secrets to me,
Tell me I'm a fool.
Tell me ancient stories
Of gently flowing light,
Help me find some peace of mind,
And tell me it's all right.
   And see how she rains, Lord,
   See how she rains.

Wild wind singing Sister,
Hold me close to you,
Run your fingers through my hair
And tell me what to do.
Let me drift and dream awhile
In the freedom of your song
Let me rest upon your breast
And tell me what went wrong.
   And see how she rains, Lord,
   See how she rains.

Have you got a sister,
Someone that you love,
Some who depends on you
But you never give enough?
Do you think she weeps at night
Like rain down from the skies,
Just like Big Sky Sister?
Love her while she cries.
   And see how she rains, Lord,
   See how she rains.
   See how she rains, Lord,
   See how she rains.

Keepin' The Faith

Want to climb up the Magic Mountain,
don't you know you gotta really be tough?
Give everything that you got inside you
and it's never gonna be enough.
And it don't get smooth and it don't get easy
when you get to the other side.
All that keeps you going
is what you got left of pride.

Can't hide from the night, it'll find where you're lying,
when you're beat down to the bone.
You can't stay there and there's no returning,
and you can't go on alone.
Put your hands around your heart
and squeeze it 'til it's dry --
Nothin' left to give
but one more losin' try.

> But if you want your future with a burning certainty,
> Keep on movin' down the line, keepin' the faith with me.

You can't live long on illusion;
there's no depending on yesterday.
Memories won't keep you fed,
and the debts are always there to pay.
The crime is time and it's running right behind you;
the world is at your heels,
No way to stay the sentencing,
no high court of appeals.

Follow where I'm walkin',
and you take every breath I do.
You ain't got a hope in Hell without me,
and I got nothin' else but you.
Don't stop kickin' -- when you do then they got you
and they put you right in the grave.
Don't look back and don't slow down --
your life is what you'll save.

> But if you want your future with a burning certainty,
> Keep on movin' down the line, keepin' the faith with me.

Keepin' the faith ...

It Almost Took A Lifetime

Look at me, I'm here at last;
I guess I ran the best of all.
I never quit, I never gave it up,
But I finally had to find someplace to fall.
I left a wayside full of half-remembered strangers, lying there behind.
And here I am, but there's a question, a question on my mind ...

Is the candle worth the contest?
That laurel wreath upon the victor's brow,
Does it really stand for something?
I don't think that it's important now.
All I ever wanted, all I asked from life, all I've had to fear
Is wrapped inside the man, the man that's lying here.

And there's peace in knowing I can rest a moment,
And somewhere in my heart I'm still alive.
It seemed to go so easily;
It seemed to go so fast ...
But it almost took a lifetime to arrive.

I had wings; they took me far,
But even mighty eagles have to land.
Time runs down; the shades of evening deepen,
But the warmth of better days still holds the sand.
I saw the ending before I ever took the road --
The course across a fine and open sky,
Now dark with clouds -- but why have wings at all, if not to fly?

The stars will turn; the morning come,
A picture out of time yet still to be,
Growing small, a shrinking, summer window
That opens on a world I'll never see.
And I am like a boat upon the water, drifting always further from the shore,
The hush of waves is all that seems to touch me anymore.

And there's peace in knowing I can rest a moment,
And somewhere in my heart I'm still alive.
It seemed to go so easily,
It seemed to go so fast ...
But it almost took a lifetime to arrive.

Arrive
Arrive
Arrive ...
It almost took a lifetime to arrive.

The Storm
Cycle

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is part of the same cycle as "Run Before the Storm" (KESSEL RUN) and "Reap the Whirlwind" (WOOKIEE COMMODE 4), a darker universe based in part on Lucas' thumbnail bio of Han in SKYWALKING, which also tells us that Wookiees have the Force. From this bio, we know that Han, for example, spent half his childhood with the Wookiees and, therefore, at the least, was exposed to the Force at an early age. Meaning, of course, that his comments to Luke in A NEW HOPE were deliberately misleading. Even with this brief bio, Han's origins remain completely mysterious.

first lesson

ILLUSTRATED BY
DANI

marcia brin

PART I

Kawarraraba's house, in which also resided his mate Tallataba, his mate's mother--a Wookiee to walk softly around!--and his two rambunctious offspring, as well as the cubling he had found on a trip to the city, was large, spacious and airy. Situated on a massive branch of one of the mighty *kekuk* trees, it seemed more to grow from the tree itself than to be some alien construct simply placed there. In that respect, it symbolized the Wookiees' desire for harmony with nature and oneness with the world around them.

The newest addition to Kawarraraba's family was carefully attempting to walk entirely around the house on the railing. Han, biting his tongue in concentration and with all the optimism of a seven-and-one-half year old, was unconcerned with the sheer drop to his right to the forest floor, hundreds of feet below and lost in perpetual mist. So intense was his concentration that he did not hear Talla's approach until she had snatched him up and away from the railing. Shaking him slightly, she gave him a sound scolding.

*That was *very* foolish, little one. If you fell from here, you would be killed.* She spoke carefully. He appeared to have a natural talent for languages and had gained much fluency on Kashyyykese in the six months he had lived with them, but he could still get lost if the speech was too rapid or mumbled.

"I'm not scared," he retorted defiantly.

There is a line between courage and foolishness, cubling, and you crossed it. To be without fear is to be insane. If you risk your life simply to prove how brave you are, all you really show is how foolish you are.

She could see remorse struggling with his defiance, and wondered again at his past, of which he had told them very little. Whatever it was, it had caused him to shutter himself, and to view the galaxy and its inhabitants with a wild animal's wariness. There had been times during the past six months when she thought he had wanted to open up, only to have him draw back again.

Sighing heavily, she put him down and gave his backside a light tap. *Go and clean up, little one. It is almost time for dinner; Kawarraraba will be home soon.*

Han scampered up the stairs to the second level. There were three rooms: one for the Eldest, a large one for Kaitiatchuk and Bunnuwabuck, Ka's and Talla's cubs, and one for him. Appropriately, his was the smallest, but after the previous four years, it seemed huge to him. And unlike that bare cubicle, this room had rapidly taken on a homey feeling. There were craygraph drawings, drawn in a childish hand, hanging on the walls, and various toys scattered about. His preference fluctuated between hard-tech games--he was fascinated by all things mechanical and space-oriented--and large stuffed animals. On the latter, he lavished a fount of love he let no one else see.

He sat now on the edge of his bed, hugging a huge tauntaun tightly, a very unhappy little boy. Ka and Talla and everyone had been so good to him these past six months. They really did *seem* to care, and he wanted more than anything to believe that it was true, but he was afraid to. Afraid to care too much; they might really be just like everyone else.

Scrunching up further, he blinked back tears. The four years before Kawarraraba had found him had taught him to be careful of his heart and his emotions. From the moment he had awakened onboard one of the ancient freighters that made up a caravan of space gypsies--the Rhom, as they called themselves--he had been alone. There were patchy memories of a time before, tinted by the eyes of a very young child; a happy time he had thought, with people who had loved him. *They had, too!* he thought half-defiantly, half-miserably.

But the Rhom had laughed at him, taunted him. *They did not love you; they abandoned you with us. They did not want you anymore than we do.* He was a burden, the Rhom had said a useless extra mouth to feed, and worse, a *gajo*, an outsider. They would set up their colorful carnivals on one planet or another, but would not permit him to attend. They were afraid, he would tell himself, afraid because they had stolen him, afraid the people who loved him would recognize him. And some part of him, growing older, would see this for the truth it was, but he was only a young child, and the jeers, the isolation, the coldness, had done their damage. He had come to doubt his memories--oh, so very, very long ago! So dim and almost forgotten--to doubt that anyone had ever loved him. Trust, ever the most fragile of emotions, had been mortally wounded.

Compounded, ultimately, by their abandonment of him. Though he had hated the Rhom, he had been terrified when they had left him there, alone, in the strange city. Alone. He shivered again at the thought. They had given that last name, Solo (he had clung stubbornly to the first name--or part of it; he dimly remembered it being longer--that he *knew* to be his) to emphasize his aloneness. Ka and his family had taken him in, and they were warm and caring, trying to make him feel as if he belonged, and he *wanted* to believe, but, well, maybe it was all a lie, and they were laughing at him, too, behind smiling masks, at him and his aloneness.

But, something inside cried, *I* want *to believe them,* and he hated the Rhom even more for making it so hard for him to do so.

It was the one thing the Rhom had taught him. How to hate.

* * *

It was a warm evening and the windows were open permitting the smells and night sounds of the forest to drift in. Han loved this time of day, when the temperatures cooled and the air became drier and more crisp. To him, the forest always seemed more alive now. And there were the stars, ice-diamonds against the velvety blackness. If he reached out, he could almost touch them. Someday he would. They called to him with a siren's song.

Special, too, was that Ka's family would gather around. It was a time for lessons and tales that always seemed to have lesson attached, and for questions and answers. At first he had sat apart, but they had worked to bring him in and now he simply took a place in the circle as if it were his right. *Maybe it was. Maybe that was what they were trying to tell him.*

Maybe someday he would believe it, and chill his fear that they, too, would abandon him.

Ka was talking about the Force, his rumbling basso a counterpoint to the forest sounds. *It is the voice of the universe, and it sings of the harmony and unity of all things. We are part of a vast community, and we draw strength from it. As we seek union with it, so do we pattern our society after it. Family, clan, honor family, world-clan, *these* are the life-blood of the People. One can travel far, but the ties will never diminish.*

He gestured to the forest beyond. *We strive to maintain a harmony with the world that nurtured us. This is part of the meaning of Life Day, to renew our ties with the life around us. All have the force in some way or another. We of the People know its softer side. Some, though, *their* Talent is of the lightening, to be wielded in the defense of all.*

Ka glanced at Han, who shifted uneasily. The young human had the uncertain feeling that Ka knew about his 'flashes,' his seeing things happening elsewhere or, even more, *yet* to happen. It was a talent that would have stood him in good stead with the Rhom, but by the time he was old enough to understand that it was some strange--and more than a little bit scary--ability he had, he had hated the Rhom too much to want to be a part of them, and he had kept his silence.

Perhaps his talent, too, was part of the Force that Ka talked about, and nothing to be afraid of. Perhaps Ka could help him to understand it, use it. Han glanced around, listening to the lessons, the tales, the laughter, wishing to speak at last but not knowing how any longer.

He was only seven-and-one-half years old, but he felt like one of the old people in the holovids. Eldest was telling an animated tale, but all he could hear was the sound of some distant part of him, weeping.

* * *

The forest acted as a living muffler, so they could make as much noise as they liked without fear of disturbing anyone. Han's natural agility and greater maneuverability enabled him to keep up with the larger Wookiee cubs.

The youngsters had generally accepted him from the time Ka and Talla had taken him in, but there were some whose elders remembered too clearly the slavers, many of whom had been human. He had had trouble with their cubs, until Bunnu, as befitted the eldest cub of the family, had given fang challenge. The others had backed down and, with time, most of the troublesome ones had forgotten their elders' grievances and had come to like Han.

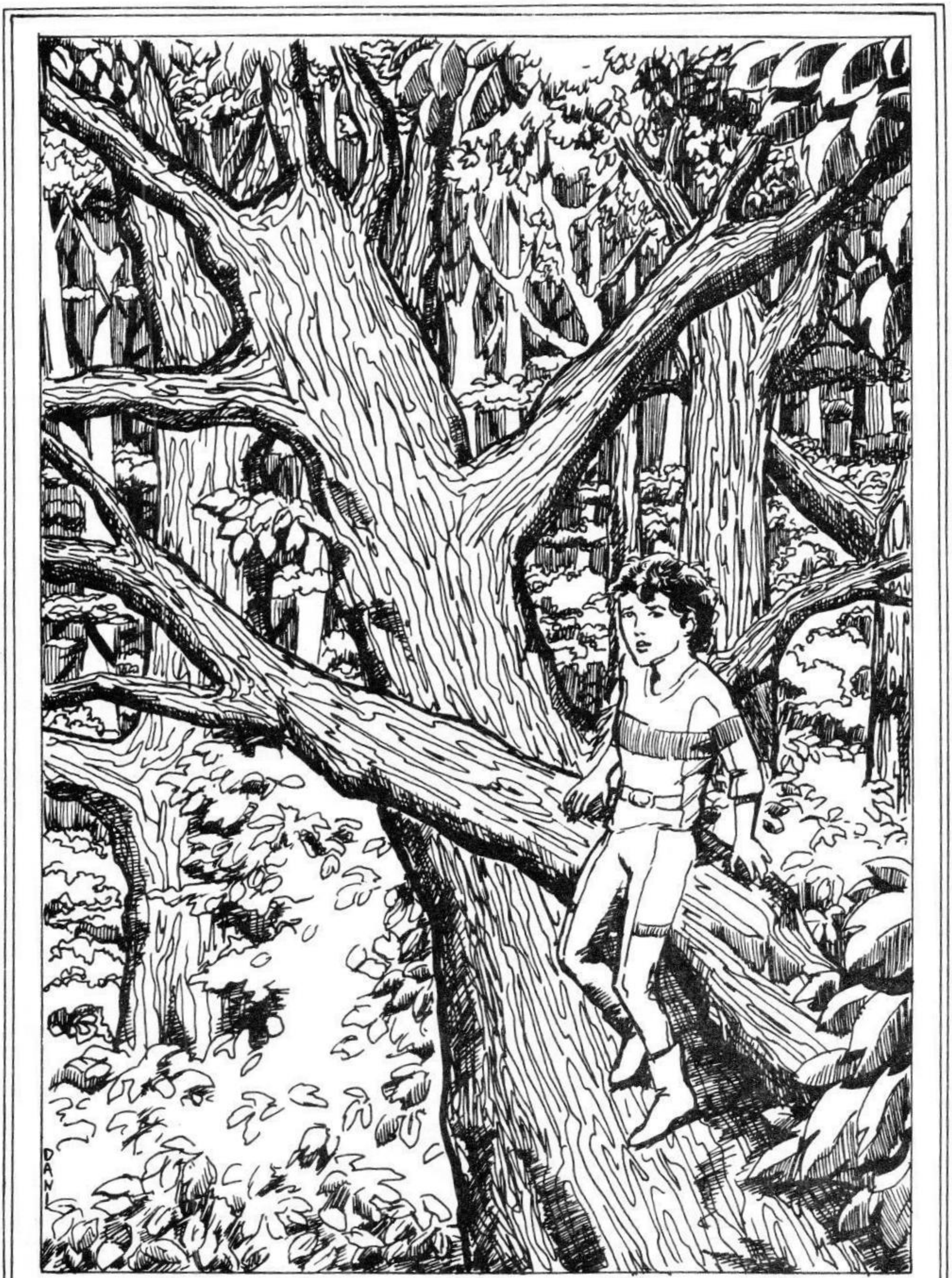
A few, though, had never become his friends. Wabba was the worst, the rare Wookiee equivalent of a human bully. He and a small group of cubs who followed him delighted in teasing, or pulling pranks on Han whenever Bunnu was not there. It was for this reason that Han had not been pleased to see Wabba and his entourage show up. He had been quietly playing with several cubs who lived nearby, but he knew Wabba would be up to *some* trouble.

Right now, Wabba was leading them deeper into the forest. It was rapidly becoming unknown territory to him. Ka had never permitted him to wander too far afield, and right now he felt a twinge of guilt at going off like this. He was sure, though, that if he left now, he would never hear the end of it from Wabba and his followers. He was equally sure that Wabba was choosing an especially difficult path for them, hoping that the human's shorter legs and lesser stamina would force him to drop out, but Han was determined to keep up.

They continued in this manner for a while before Wabba called a halt. Han sank down gratefully. He was bone-tired and hungry and thoroughly lost. It had been dumb to go along with Wabba, and Ka would have every right to be angry. Wabba was at the far end of the branch, whispering with his cohorts and casting glances in Han's direction. The latter was too tired to care about whatever it was the cub was up to. It was very comfortable sitting against the tree trunk, and if he just closed his eyes...

He awoke with a start and momentary disorientation. Where was he? The memory of the afternoon's events filtered back. Now the forest was cloaked in darkness. How late was it? Ka would be furious. He peered into the night. Where was everyone else?

Han called out their names and was answered with silence. Some sort of joke, no doubt, keeping silent to frighten him. He reluctantly admitted to himself that it was working, at least a little. Cautiously--it was *very* dark--he groped his way around the massive branch, whispering the cubs' names and stopping occasionally to feel around in the blackness. The moons were not visible this time of the month, and nothing broke the darkness. Granted, they would have been poor aids at best, since little of their light was able to filter any distance down into the dense growth, but right now, however little, it would have been welcome.


DANL

After a while, Han gave up and sank down against the trunk. There was no longer any doubt in his mind. He was absolutely, totally, positively alone.

Panic erupted as the realization sank home. The night was scary enough, especially on Kashyyyk where there were some nasty nocturnal denizens, but this, this was his worst fear realized.

Alone. Abandoned. As before. *Twice before*, the Rhom mocked. Always to be left alone. The night seemed suddenly darker, more menacing, and he really was just a little boy. A little boy that nobody wanted.

With a small sob, he began to run, blindly, driven by his hurt and his fear. Massive leaves slapped against him as he fled. The sounds of the night bayed at his heels, and ominous shadows reached for him. Suddenly exhausted, he collapsed, gasping for breath, too tired to move. He curled against the bole of the tree, rocking back and forth, wondering if there was something wrong with *him*. Yet softly, in the back of his mind, a voice noted that he had been deserted by cubs who had never liked him, that Ka and Talla had never closed him out. If anything, *he* had held back, afraid they would hurt him.

Confused, he gave up. He only knew that he didn't want to be alone anymore; he wanted Ka and Talla. He sniffled and made a sound suspiciously like crying. It was only a small sob, though, since he was only a small boy and it was a very large and dark forest.

* * *

Han was running, running, but it was no use. *It* was gaining on him and he couldn't get away from it, no matter how hard he tried. If he could only find Ka, Ka would protect him. But *it* was getting closer and he called out Ka's name desperately. Suddenly, faintly, from a great distance, he thought he heard his name. The sound echoed and he wasn't sure from which direction the call had come, but *it* shivered and backed away. He cried out again and was rewarded with another response, closer this time. He could place the sound now and he raced toward it. Afraid Ka would stop calling him, he repeatedly shouted the Wookiee's name and he ran, lungs bursting, toward the voice. Ka would protect him, would keep that formless, fathomless shadow at bay.

"Just don't go away, Ka," he pleaded. "Don't leave me! Ka---!"

"Ka!" he screamed and sat up. He realized that, tired in every pore, he had fallen asleep. It was all a dream, Ka's coming for him. No one was coming for him; he was all alone, as the Rhom had said.

Han ran a sleeve across his nose, feeling very sorry for himself. The dream lingered; he could still hear his name being called. Then he gave a start. He *did* hear his name! Off in the distance, but coming closer. He could make out Ka's basso rumble amidst other voices, and jumped to his feet.

"Here! I'm here, Ka!" He could make out lights now, heading his way. Behind his happiness at being rescued, uncertainty warred with hope. Ka *had* come. Maybe...

Then Ka was bursting from the darkness and Han consigned his uncertainty to the disintegrator. He hurled himself into Ka's massive arms, half-crying and half-laughing. "You didn't leave me, too," he whispered fiercely, over and over again into Ka's ear.

Startled, Ka, who had been making soothing noises and patting Han's back, turned to stare at the human child. *Cubling, what is this nonsense? How could you not think I would come? You are family. And,* he gestured at the other Wookiees, *you are Clan.*

"I am?" Han asked in a wondering tone. Seeing the confirmation in Ka's eyes, he buried his face in the Wookiee's fur. Slowly at first, then ever more rapidly, Han poured out the story of his time with the Rhom, his loneliness, his fears. By the time he was finished, Ka was rumbling with anger.

*The Rhom are *kreeshwarra*.* he snarled the Wookiee epithet, *and they have no honor. Though,* admitted the ever-honest Wookiee, *they have a sense of Clan.* Then he shifted Han in his arms so that they were face to face.

The Rhom are what they are, but as for those who were your people, trust your memories, not the taunts of the Rhom. He ruffled the child's hair with one hand. *That is the hardest, is it not, cubling? Learning to trust again. You *can* trust *us*--and you *must* trust yourself. Too much will be wasted if you doubt yourself.*

"You know about those things..." Han hesitated, then asked, "They aren't bad, are they?"

Ka laughed. *No, cubling, all of the People share in the Force, though our Talent is different from yours. Would you like to learn about it?*

Han nodded eagerly. Ka rumbled laughter again. *Good. We will start when we get home--where Bunnu will be very pleased to tell you all about the punishment meted out to Wabba for his action.*

Han didn't even hear the last part. He was too busy thinking about how nice a word "home" was.

PART II

Krakis was a cold planet. All of the year. Not uninhabited, though, having been settled by hardy colonists almost two hundred years earlier. While one could hardly call it a garden spot, massive deposits of rhyllium made it considerably more attractive. The bulk of the habitations were underground, out of the strong winds and unconcerned with monster snowfalls.

On the surface, the planet was an intermitting vista of white, incapable of supporting organic life. "Plants," if thus they could be called, were actually crystalline structures that "produced" crystalline flowers. Nothing flew in the air or crawled on the earth. Krakis was *very* cold.

Han, on the other hand, was warmer than he would like. It was Krakis' summer, during which the winds moderated, the temperatures rose to a blistering minus ten degrees and the sun had been known to shine from time to time. Still, there *was* snow, and that was enough for Talla. Wookiees had no problem with heat or cold, but humans, well, *everyone* knew how fragile humans were. And a child, to boot.

So, knowing that Han had been promised that he could accompany Ka and representatives of the other Clans on their journey to Krakis to negotiate for a new supply contract of rhyllium, Talla had purchased large amounts of warm clothing for him. The end result was that Han, wearing layer upon layer of thermal and heavily insulated clothing topped by a fur-lined parka and mittens over gloves, stood a greater chance of suffocating than of freezing. He looked as if he could be entered in a barrel-rolling contest as one of the barrels, and he was uncomfortably warm.

It would never occur to him to complain, however, a holdover from his days with Rhom, when a complaint would be rewarded with a backhand slap. Not that he expected anything like that now. The last year, since the incident with Wabba, had been heaven. He was truly a part of Ka's family and of Ka's Clan. He had even received a Clan totem, but not yet a Clan name, which did not come until he was older. All Wookiees received a Clan name at a certain age, in addition to the personal name given to them by their parents. It would be used at formal gatherings and the only name given to strangers.

Wabba, thoroughly chastened by the stiff punishment he had received from the Clan elders, and threatened with dire bodily harm by Bunnu, had studiously avoided Han since the incident, which pleased Han no end. And now that he was starting to assert himself, he was finding out that he often ended up the leader of the day's activities. Humans had more vivid imaginations than did Wookiees, and Han could generally be counted on to come up with new and exciting games to play.

There was only one *kreebag* in the tar pit, so to speak. Ka, Talla and the Eldest, all had tried to give him some basic instruction in the Force--only the simplest things; humans, because of their more volatile natures, usually did not begin serious training until the beginning of their teens--but to no avail. The main problem was that, in order to share in the Force, the user had to open himself, had to let the barrier down. Han had spent too much of his short life maintaining those barriers to let go that easily. He was simply afraid to do so, though he would have died before admitting it to anyone.

He had *tried*, but he always drew back. It was like some great abyss that yawned before him, and everyone told him there was a bridge but he just couldn't believe it. If only he would test that bridge just once... But, up to now, he had not been able to push himself out onto it.

It really *was* getting very warm inside all those clothes. Now that they were inside, maybe Ka would let him take some of them off. Han tugged at Ka's hand. "Can I get out of some of my clothes? I'm *hot*."

Ka chuckled. *Perhaps Talla overdid it a little, cubling. Here, let me help you.* The Wookiee reached down and opened the jacket, which Han privately thought was a good thing; he was so stuffed with clothes he couldn't have reached it himself.

Seeing that things were going so well--the pile of clothes was growing larger--Han decided to push a little further. "And can I go around by myself? I won't get in anyone's way. Please?"

Ka was no more proof against a pleading eight-and-one-half year old than were most people. With a slight smile, and a stern admonition not to go too far and not to bother anyone, he gave Han the requested permission to wander.

That was all he needed to hear. He scampered off before Ka had a chance to change his mind. For the next hour, he wandered through the underground city. Fascinated as he was by all things mechanical, he listened wide-eyed as various technicians, pleased by his enthusiastic attention, explained the workings of the great machines that were the lifeblood of the city.

He came across a class of children around his own age. When a short recess was called, a number of the children, as curious about him as he was about them, came over to him. Han was a little shy, his dealings with human children having been limited, but his was basically an outgoing personality, and he was soon chatting away.

Kashzyyyk fascinated them the most. They, like several generations before them, had spent their entire lives on, or rather, under a planet of snow and ice. Han was more than willing to tell the other children about his home, where the sun shone more often than not and where you went out all year round without protective clothing. A world where green was the dominant color--this brought murmurs from the others; green was almost unknown to them--and which teemed with life, plant and animal. Descriptions of flowers and tales of water that fell from the heavens *unfrozen* held the children enthralled. They were not precisely sure they would want to *live* in such a crazy place, but it was definitely exciting to hear about it. It was, therefore, with great reluctance that they said goodbye when they were called back to class.

Han waved at them cheerfully and continued his exploration. Drawn as always by the lure of space, he headed for the underground landing bay. Getting somewhat turned around, he ended up coming in from the freight side. Several piles of crates and boxes blocked his view. As he started around them, he heard a voice that stopped him cold. A voice from his past.

"You are sure there will be no one to bother us?"

Han dropped down behind some of the boxes, breathing as heavily as if he had run a great distance. He glanced down at his hands; they were trembling, and he was angry at himself for feeling this way.

Kalavo was the headman of the Rhom clan with which Han had lived. What was he--*they*, since Han was sure the rest of the clan had to be with him--doing here? Whatever it was, it would profit the Rhom, but not Krakis. The Rhom believed that the outside galaxy existed solely for the Rhom to feed off. *Gaje si dilo*. All outsiders are fools. Or so the Rhom held, and they acted on their belief. They did not hold jobs, not because they were lazy, but because the *gaje* had been placed here to provide for the Rhom. If the *gaje* were hurt in the process, well, that was just too bad, wasn't it?

Receiving a grunt of affirmation from the person to whom Kalavo was speaking, the Rhom continued. "Good. Then we can make the switch undetected. You will be paid when it is all completed."

Han could almost sense the hesitation in the other. "Perhaps we could leave them some. They...without them, they might die."

"Yekke buliasa nashti beshes pe done grastende."

"What?"

"'With one behind, one cannot ride two beasts of burden.' You cannot do what is best for them and what is best for you. You wish to escape this ice-ball, and with enough credits to make your way. So, with the switch, we both will profit. Perhaps we will even end up selling their own property back to them, heh?" Kalavo's tone carried a trace of scorn. "They are *dile*, fools."

Han bit his lip. He had to get help. Ka would be able to deal with Kalavo, whatever it was that the Rhom was after. They were nice people, the Krakii, and Han did not want them getting hurt.

He started to back away toward the door when his foot came down on the edge of a small trans-cart. It moved slightly beneath him and, losing his balance, he tumbled backward against a pile of boxes, which crashed noisily to the floor. Stealth no longer a concern, Han scrambled to his feet for the dash to the door but a hand shot out and grasped his shoulder. The grip was painfully tight and all Han's wriggling availed him nothing.

Kalavo gave a low chuckle. "Well, well, is this not amusing? Our little *gaje*. The *urme*, the evil spirits, were playing with you, yes?"

The other man came into Han's line of sight. He was light of build and nervous of manner. "What do we do now? He could get us into real trouble."

"Which he will *not* do. I threw him away once, so I shall simply do so again. Into the snow."

Kalavo's companion started at that. "But, but he'll die out there! You can't do this!" He backed away. "I don't want any part of this!"

"Don't be a fool," Kalavo snarled. "I will not throw everything away for this one." He shook Han for emphasis. "If you have not the stomach for it, then leave."

The Kraki did not need a second invitation to disappear. Kalavo, disdainful of Han's struggling, carried him to a small speeder and threw him into the back seat. A powerful backhand slap knocked Han into one of the side windows, leaving his head ringing and his vision blurred. He hardly noticed when Kalavo requested clearance out of the hanger or when they speeder slipped into the wintry world beyond.

Han had no idea how far they travelled before Kalavo brought the vehicle to an abrupt halt. The Rhom turned and smiled at his captive. "They say little boys like to play in the snow. Shall we see?" He reached over the seat, grabbed Han and, pulling him forward, tossed him out the door he had opened. "Have fun." With a wolfish grin, he closed the wingdoor, shutting out the wind, the snow, and Han.

Han remembered how much he had hated Kalavo all those years. If there was one thing the Rhom had taught him, it was the value of a good curse. The malediction was powered with all Han's pent-up anger, exactly as he had heard old Pivli do it. Perhaps it would have no effect, but it was worth doing as a release for his feelings.

The speeder zoomed off and he was alone in the endless whiteness. Bitter cold slashed through his clothing. Young as he was, he knew he had to do *something*, but what?

It suddenly seemed to him that behind the wind he could hear the Eldest's voice. "It is your shield, the Force. Wrap yourself in it." A shield, perhaps, but one he had been afraid to reach out to. Too many years of keeping himself *to* himself. Now, though, now there was no choice. If he could just reach out...

He closed his eyes; there was no more time. As he had done with the Eldest, he let his mind float free. Immediately there was the familiar tug of the Force, like a strong current in a river. He sailed on it, in it, thrilled as always by its touch. If only he weren't so afraid to let go, to give some control over to something else.

There, there it was ahead. The wall. His barrier. He had always been stopped by it, but not this time. Suddenly angry with himself and his fears, he hurled his thought forward like a spear, for the heart of the wall. There was a moment's resistance, but the barrier could not hold against his suddenly overwhelming desire to bring it down. It shattered into an infinity of pieces.

And then it was before him, the glittering golden web of the Force, festooned from end to end with the countless colored gems, the essences of the Force-talented. A great song played along the strands of the web. Delighted, he danced before it, warmed by its welcome, wondering how he could ever have been afraid to take the plunge.

Cocooned by the Force, he felt warm and comforted, but a voice back in his mind pointed out that his body on Krakis was not as well off. This all had taken but seconds and now, following the urging of the Force, he was racing downward, past walls of ice. Strangely, it began to get warmer. At last, he reached a point where the ice melted completely. Beneath him now was a mountain of fire. What had his edu-tape called them? Volcanoes, that was it. The surface of the planet was littered with them.

Somewhat uncertainly, he reached out with the Force and drew the heat to him. It appeared as a column rising upward beneath him as he retreated toward the surface. He slipped back, the heat now enveloping him. In seconds, he was toasty warm, from head to toe. He kept his eyes tightly shut, to avoid anything that might break his concentration.

To his surprise, he found that he could "see" the world around him anyway. It lacked the colors that he knew with his eyes open, but gained new ones: the heat, invisible to the eye normally, became a plume of orange-red; the ice took on a hue that he could only label as *cold*. Characteristics became colors.

Ka had told him many times that he should put more trust in the Force than in his eyes, but he had not understood. Besides, his past had made him a cynic at eight years of age, and he trusted only what he could see. Now it finally made sense. Should the situation ever arise in the future, he would know there was sight beyond his eyes.

As he concentrated to hold the warmth, he thought he could hear Ka's voice, calling his name. Listening carefully, he realized it *was* Ka, but it was drifting on the Force, undimmed by Krakis' heavy winds. He called back the same way, feeling rather pleased with himself.

It seemed hours before he felt himself lifted up. He opened his eyes to see Ka, smiling broadly at him. The Wookiee held Han in the crook of one massive arm, as he worked at slipping Han's parka onto the boy. Han quickly finished the job, then hugged Ka tightly.

"You found me!"

Ka laughed. *It was not hard to do, cubling.* He made a sweeping gesture and Han looked around, then blinked in amazement. There was a hundred-foot wide circle of melted ice and mush. Ka rumbled again. *You were well on your way to melting the surface! And broadcasting rather loudly, too. Not bad, cubling.*

Han ducked his head, feeling strangely embarrassed. Then he straightened, his face serious. "Ka, you have to tell them. It was Kavalo--," Han hesitated. "I told you about him." Ka nodded and snarled. "I overheard him and someone from here--I don't know what, but they were going to do something *bad!* Kavalo caught me listening and left me here."

Did he use a speeder, cubling? With the designation delta-pi-three-seven-eight? Han thought hard, trying to see the speeder in his mind, then he nodded. *Then do not worry, cubling. He will do no further harm to anyone. We passed such a speeder crashed in the snow--the wind, perhaps--but there were no life readings, so we did not stop.*

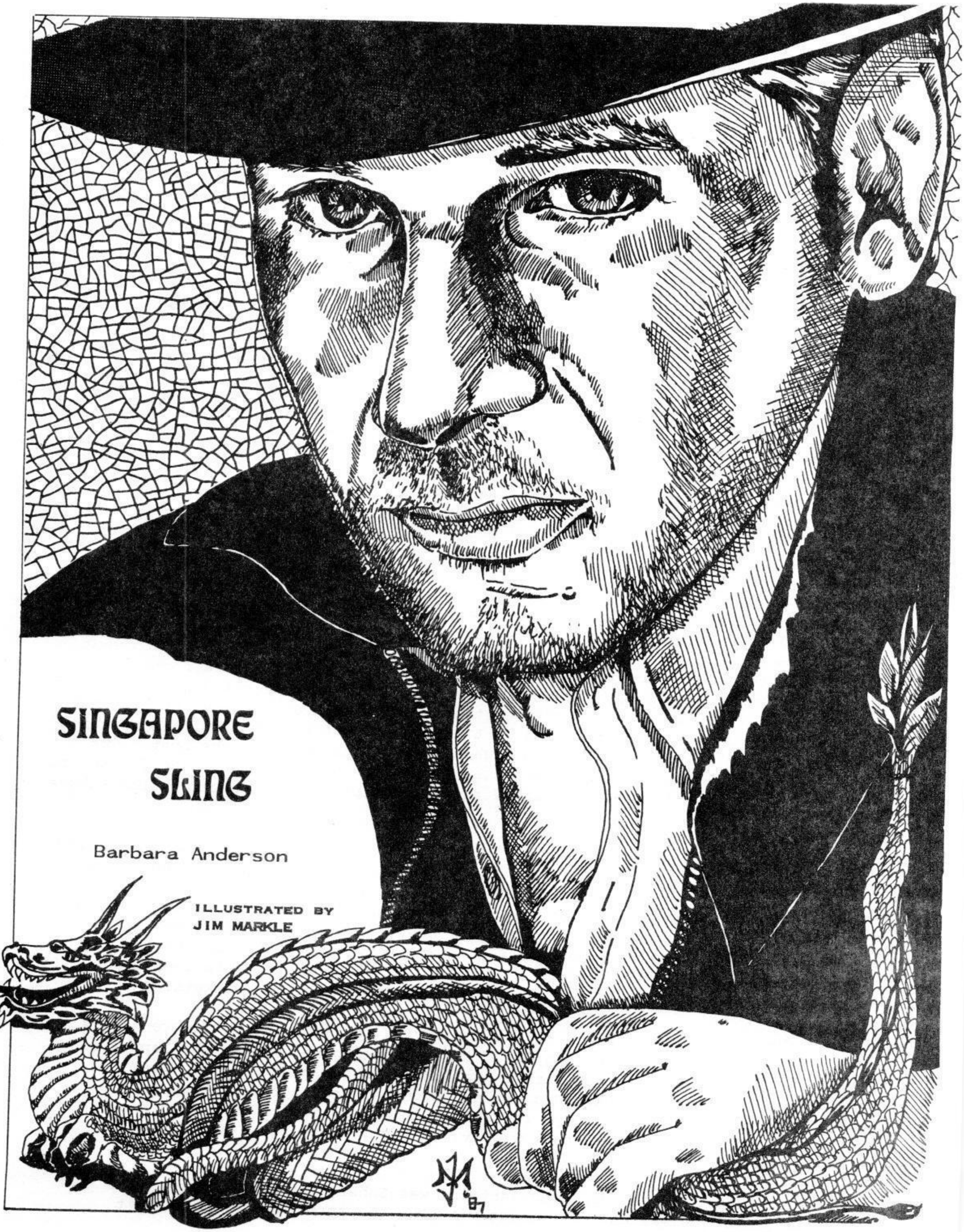
Curses were powerful things, Han decided after careful thought. He would remember for the future; careless words could be dangerous. Right now, though, he was not going to worry about it. He felt very warm and safe in Ka's arms and he basked in the Wookiee's obvious pleasure in Han's breakthrough with the Force.

To his surprise, he found himself yawning and he snuggled more closely against Ka. His thoughts circled around the events of the day. It had finally come down to *trust*, to taking a chance on something outside of himself.

That, he realized, was what all his time with Ka and his family had been about. The years with the Rhom had taught him to rely on only himself. This last year had gone a long way to changing that. He had come to trust others and something he could not see with his eyes or touch with his hands.

And he had heard the song of the Force which would remain with him forever. He bet that the stars sang, too; he would go one day and find out. Right now, though, sleeping seemed much more important. He never even noticed when they arrived back at the underground city.

* * *



SINGAPORE SLING

Barbara Anderson

ILLUSTRATED BY
JIM MARKLE

MALAYA 1933

The sun was setting, casting long shadows on the deck of a Chinese merchant junk that was anchored in a sheltered, all but hidden cove on the west coast of Malaya. Located midway between Singapore and the city of Malacca, the cove was only one of a hundred just like it that ran up and down the shore of the Malacca Strait. On closer inspection--if one were foolish enough to get closer--the shadows betrayed the junk's true nature as the glint of metal gleamed from between the wood boards overlaying the actual hull. She was a pirate gunboat, hiding from the British naval cruisers that regularly patrolled the Strait waters.

Two figures left the boat, quietly rowing into shore where just a few yards of white sand separated the water from an almost impenetrable jungle. A break in the dense foliage indicated where a narrow path had been cleared. The figures disappeared into it. Perhaps a mile inland, they came upon a temple complex long reclaimed by time and the elements. The structures were old, the carved masonry cracked and crumbling with idols and statues lying in broken pieces on the ground. Its architectural style was clearly Oriental with some Indian influence as evidenced by the rotting hardwood ridges and upturned eves on the roofing, yet there were also spired stupas from which gold leaf peeled in long hanging strips.

Inside the buildings, the two men had to step over giant tree roots that protruded through intricately patterned tiled floors. Ferns sprouted at every wall and window seam, while endless lianas wound choking tendrils about anything that stood still for more than a minute. They finally made their way to what was once the central courtyard. A soaring, columnated cliff face formed a towering backdrop around half the courtyard with the temple buildings forming the other half. A ring of poles defined the circular area and it was obvious that they were once meant to hold some sort of light. But now, the only light came from a single ship's lantern held high by one of the men from the boat. The lantern swung, illuminating a vast chamber inside the cliff face, the flickering flame revealing half-a-dozen rows of ancient script incised into the stone above the opening.

The chamber itself was dominated by a statue; a huge free-standing carving of a dragon. It was perhaps sixty feet long from nostrils to tail and twenty feet tall at the highest point on the frilled, ribbed back. It curled around the chamber in a stretched out sleeping position with the chin resting on the ground. As a work of art, it was magnificent; from each golden-green scale to the wicked curved claws fashioned from some ivory-like substance, to the delicate whiskers around the fanged mouth. Complete in every minute detail--but one. It was without eyes, possessing only empty, haunting, unseeing sockets.

The men stood in the courtyard, observing the imposing sculpture from a distance. One was Lo Feng, an old Chinese shopkeeper, who had the reputation--and well deserved--of black market dealings, who could obtain rare items or information...for a price. His wizened eyes had seen much, perhaps too much, for his nights were not always restful. Stooped over with age, with his proud pigtail and drooping mustache now grey, he shuffled along in black coolie pants, tunic and slippers.

His companion, holding the lantern, was Sahar, captain of the pirate junk in the cove. He was native Malayan with the characteristic cafe-au-lait colored skin and gleaming, straight black hair. He wore it long, as was the pirate way, letting it hang loose during a raid to increase his menacing appearance. Sahar was a Malayan gone wrong. The average Malay was indolent to a fault, yet courageous and fiercely loyal. The pirate captain possessed none of these qualities. He was cruel to the point of sadism; ambitious, aspiring to higher things than mere piracy. He gave neither friendship nor loyalty and unlike Lo Feng, slept very well at night.

Moving closer to the chamber, Sahar held the lantern to inspect the unsettlingly realistic statue and the area around it. The walls inside the chamber appeared to be covered with an unreflective black soot that swallowed up the light. The sculpture, however, reflected light like crazy and with each sway of the lantern, the scales almost seemed to ripple, playing tricks with one's eyesight, making it seem as though the dragon was breathing. It was only clay over a wired frame, only gold leaf and lacquer, yet it struck fear into the hardened heart of Lo Feng. He clutched a lucky talisman on a cord around his neck, refusing to go any closer.

"Stop trembling, old fool," Sahar chided, impatience in his voice. "It is an idol, nothing more. Tell me what the writings say!" He backed up a step to better see the inscriptions.

"It is monstrous evil! No can, no can!" Lo Feng attempted to retreat in his fastest shuffle, but Sahar drew out a knife, a Malayan kris, and laid the distinctive wavy-edged blade against Feng's pulsating carotid artery.

"If you value your life...," he grabbed the Chinaman's pigtail, indicating that he would cut it off, "...or your eternity with your ancestors, you will."

Lo Feng gibbered away in semi-hysterical Chinese, begging to keep his pigtail and promising to do whatever was required of him. He squinted at the worn characters, deciphering what words he could. "Restore the eyes...Lung Wang spirit will walk the quaking earth..." He squinted further. "The symbols not clear," he fearfully explained. "Power and wealth mentioned. A warning..."

"Never mind, learned one." Sahar's oily dark eyes gleamed in avaricious malevolence. "That there is power and wealth is all I need to know." *Power and wealth,* he thought, was there anything else to life? He held the lantern to again shine on the carving. "The Dragon Eyes, Lo Feng...you must find them for me."

The old Oriental knew better than to protest again. "Time...I will need time. It is not easy task."

"You will find them for me," he threatened, not about to be placated, "or I will feed you piece by piece to the crocs in the river. And Feng," Sahar waved the kris, "say nothing of this to anyone, especially to Madam Mei Ling. I plan to use this place for a base and she will want to know of the things here. Power and wealth. Ptah!" he spat. "She is a woman and women know nothing of these things!" Lo Feng wisely did not comment, even though it was known that Mei Ling Chang conducted her business, illegal and otherwise, with a fair, just and learned manner, without the needless, wholesale murder characterized by the Strait pirates themselves. "I will have this power and wealth," Sahar continued. "Hold your worthless tongue and we can continue our mutually profitable arrangement."

SINGAPORE

The Raffles Bar: A cool and elegant place to spend an evening in the British colony of Singapore. Elegant with gleaming accents of brass, with polished hardwoods on the floor and wall paneling. Elegant with the crystal glassware displayed at the mirrored bar, with the profusion of glittering jewelry on the women in evening gowns. Yet it was cool with welcomed breezes from the overhead ceiling fans, with the tropical plants and the furniture of rattan and bamboo. Cool with the air of Singapore's aristocracy.

The Raffles Bar: A hot and sleazy place to spend an evening. Hot with the illegal affairs of a successful criminal underworld. Sleazy with smoky corner tables where opium deals were negotiated in the barest of whispers, where a thriving slave trade found some of its best customers; where pirates, thieves, and worse bought or sold smuggled, stolen goods behind a veneer of tuxedoed respectability.

The Raffles Bar: A place of interesting people. On any given evening, one might rub shoulders not only with the British upper class, but perhaps a Malayan sultan or two. A Chinese prince or an Indian maharajah. A Turkish caliph or...an American archeologist.

Feeling right at home in all of the above, Doctor Indiana Jones sat at the Raffles Bar, leaning one arm on the lacquered top while lifting a double Jack Daniels with the other. The drink was a bit watered down as he had been nursing it along for the better part of an hour. Impatient, he twirled the glass in his hand and checked his watch--again. Whatever happened to the reknowned punctuality of the British? Turning in his seat, he surveyed the room once more.

It was the color he noticed first--then the dress. A long smooth, unbroken line of red silk. The silk flowed over one of the nicest combinations of convex and concave curves he had seen in a long time. Long black hair like a veil of black satin drew his attention to the back of the dress which dipped down to what had to be her last vertebrae. An elbow rested on an impatiently tilted hip while a hand petulantly dangled an empty champagne glass. Clearly a damsel in distress. Enter Indiana Jones, knight to the rescue. Before sliding off the bar stool, Indy made a quick check in the bar mirror, making sure his tie was straight while the eyeglasses were slipped into the white dinner jacket pocket.

Satisfied, he took a few steps in her direction, making his move. He halted in mid-stride, though, when a big Chinese gorilla dressed in a tux appeared out of nowhere to take her glass. The overtly large Chinaman looked as though he'd be more at home swinging through some trees. Alerted, Indy gave the room a quick once-over, spotting two more that fit the predatory, suspicious look; more so than the usual Raffles riff-raff. Indy took particular notice of one; a Malayan at first glance. A coincidental reflection off the bar mirror illuminated just the man's eyes in a horizontal slash of light. It gave Indy the shudders as the eyes were like a snake's; unblinking with a malevolent, hypnotic gleam. There was a chilling badness to the rest of the face, also. It was lacking something...a soul maybe...a heart definitely. The man circled the room, slithering around the periphery, and never taking his eyes from the woman. Indy couldn't tell if he was guarding her or stalking.

Curious, bored, and just plain nosy, Indiana continued to watch as she was approached by a distinguished older gentleman who began a conversation with her. Gesturing towards an empty table, he placed a guiding hand under her elbow.

Jones could see her head look down, clear disdain for the touch in her body language--and she had great body language, he decided. The objectionable hold was hastily and awkwardly withdrawn as was the offer.

The whole scenario was intriguing, but it spelled trouble, no matter which way he looked at it and he had enough troubles of his own. Wanting no part of it, he headed back to his abandoned drink. As he turned on his heel, his peripheral vision caught a flash, a glint of bare metal parting the curtains at the window from the outside. Visually following the probable line of throw, he reacted out of pure reflex. With a desperate diving rush, he tackled the mysterious beauty, carrying her along with him to the floor as a knife whistled past his right ear.

Not a split second later, amidst erupting pandemonium, Indiana was brutally yanked to his feet. Both his hands were pulled up tight behind his back until he swore his shoulder blades were meeting for the first time. A hand snapped his head back while another held a small kris to his throat. In the meantime, the woman was being assisted up from the floor by the Malayan. Seething fury on her face, she faced the totally helpless Doctor Jones.

Seeing her face for the first time, Indiana was taken aback. If he could, he would have dropped his jaw, but the cold edge of the blade under his Adam's apple kept him from attempting even a deep breath. With a body like that, he had expected great beauty. He wasn't wrong. What he didn't expect was the black patch over the left eye, nor the visible ends of a scar that ran from the bridge of her nose to the left temple. He involuntarily winced, thinking of what lay in between.

She glared at him with an eye that was the color of pale moonstones, then went to nod at the man holding the knife. That they were in a very public place didn't seem to bother her one bit. A sudden confused look came over her features. Slowly, tentatively, she extended a hand, brushing two fingers over Indiana's right ear. They came back with fresh blood on them. She stared at the red liquid, a furrow of concentration across her brow. Then logical thought took over. She abruptly whirled around. There behind her, unnoticed for the commotion, was the knife meant for her, embedded in the paneling. Without a wasted breath, she rattled off a string of commands in an unfamiliar dialect. The two guards released Indiana, withdrawing the deadly length of steel as they rushed out towards the street in search of the real assassin.

The professor breathed a sigh of deep relief while rubbing some life back into his abused arms and shoulders and checking that his jugular artery was still intact. "Whoever is long gone by now, you know," he said, while pulling out a handkerchief to dab at the neat little slice across his ear.

"That is obvious," she replied cooly, "but someone may have seen something." She blatantly appraised him, her expression softening. "It seems I am indebted to you for saving my life."

"So it seems," he said drily with a hint of a crooked smile. "No thanks to your companions." Indiana wasn't about to flinch from heaping guilt or insult where it belonged. He had risked his life and had been manhandled for his efforts. That sort of thing tended to adversely affect his social demeanor.

"They will be severely punished," said the Malayan in clipped, impatient tones, clearly wanting to end the exchange. "Come, Madam Chang."

Doctor Jones didn't appreciate the condescending tone. "Does that include you?" he asked in undisguised challenge. "And I believe I was still talking with the lady."

The snake eyes burned in barely controlled anger while the face took on a dark malignant contenance. Indy found himself surreptiously slipping his hand into his pocket, feeling for the reassuring presence of the revolver. He might need it.

It didn't come to that. Madam Chang had also disliked the tone. "I will leave when I am ready, Sahar!" she snapped. "Do not order me...ever!" Sahar became all subservient, backing away, murmuring apologies, but the subservience went no deeper than the spoken word. She turned her attention back to the scientist, bringing up her fingers. The ones with his blood on them. "You have also shed blood in my defense, however trifling." He offered his handkerchief, but she shook her head, placing the two fingers between her lips and removing the few drops with her tongue. His shirt collar, as well as his pants, suddenly felt much too tight. "There is now a promise between us. I did not ask for it, but I will honor it. If there is ever a time or a moment, I will give you your life in return." She turned and followed Sahar out the door.

* * *

The view was memorable as he watched her walk away. To say that Indiana Jones was smitten was an understatement. Smitten, interested, fascinated. Madam Chang might not have been two thousand years old, nor covered with centuries of dust, but he was as intrigued with her as if she had been. Crossing quickly to the window, he was rewarded with a fleeting glimpse of a pair of long shapely legs as they swung into the back seat of a cream-colored Dusenberg. As the car pulled away, he felt something of a loss. She had stirred something within him, something that lingered like a distinctive fragrance. His mind still filled with her image, he barely took notice of the police car that pulled up as the Dusenberg turned a corner.

Still tasting the metallic flavor of unused adrenalin, Indy once again backtracked to the bar, noting that the signs of the incident had already been cleared away by an efficient, unobtrusive staff. He suddenly felt like having something native. "Pahuit, please," he ordered. The Raffles "speciality" of gin, vermouth and bitters went down easy to settle his overloaded nerves. He found his thoughts drifting back to her, trying to place her background. Eurasian, he thought, with more Chinese than anything. There had been a definite yellow tinge to the procelain finish skin and a pronounced fold to the eye. At least, she had been raised Chinese. The high concealing Mandarin collar on the dress had been a dead giveaway. Western fashions were becoming increasingly acceptable with side slits as high as one dared, or the back as open as Madam Chang's had been, but Oriental modesty still forbade a woman to expose her throat. Indy would've bet his last pectograph that she had a beautiful throat; soft, sensitive, supple...

"Doctor Jones?" A hand tapped his shoulder.

"Huh?" Jolted out of his very private thoughts, Indy jumped. Turning around, he glared a bit at the balding, bespectacled man who had unwittingly brought an abrupt halt to his developing fantasy. The man extended a hand which Indy took.

"How do you do? I'm Carveth Lyons. I believe you're waiting for me and I do apologize for being late. Couldn't be helped...railway business. Now I have... my word!! You're bleeding, sir!"

Jones dabbed once more at the auricular injury, the cloth coming away with a much smaller stain than before. "It's nothing," he waved a hand. "Cut myself shaving."

If Lyons saw anything unusual in the location of the archeologist's shaving cut, he had the proper English manners not to mention it. "Yes, well...to business, I suppose. I hope you can be ready to leave for Malacca first thing in the morning."

"No problem. What kind of boat did you get?"

Lyons looked a little sheepish and more than just a little embarrassed. "There *is* a problem, Doctor Jones. I realize you stipulated the fastest route to Malacca in our correspondence, which ordinarily would be by water, but the pirates in the Strait have been bold as brass as of late, even routing a British gunboat just last week; most embarrassing for the naval chaps, and I just couldn't find a captain willing to sail up the Strait for the sum of money you gave me to work with. They were all most unreasonable." Carveth seemed genuinely distressed that he had been unable to fulfill his part of the bargain. "I'm afraid you'll have to go overland, through the interior."

Indiana choked on the pahuit. "Overland!" *God,* he thought, *that will take days in the Malayan jungle.* True, he didn't have to be back for the new semester for another month, but a few days lost here and a few days lost there added up. If Lo Feng and Malacca turned out to be another false lead in his search for the now bedamned last remains of Nurhachi, he was going to have to return home, then pick up the trail at another time. The trail would undoubtedly have grown cold in the interim or disappeared altogether. He signaled for a refill. Overland! Malaya was coast-to-coast jungle, not one of his favorite vacation spots. "Are you sure you checked into all possibilities at the docks?" he asked hopefully, thinking that he wouldn't mind if Carveth had secured a somewhat dubious ship and crew.

"Absolutely! Unless you want the actual pirates themselves, in which case they'd slit your throat as soon as the anchor went up." He continued as if the subject of sailing hadn't even been mentioned. "Now, as I was saying, I have a Malayan guide in mind for you and a few coolies and Malays for transport. The money you sent was quite adequate to outfit an expedition of this sort and I think you will be quite comfortable."

Indiana was starting to get a headache from Lyon's long-winded sentences. Whatever happened to the reknowned British reticence? And Lyons was *still* talking.

"The only other thing I couldn't manage was someone to walk snake-point for you."

The glass in Indy's hand nearly slipped through his fingers. Pretending nonchalance, Jones casually shifted his weight on the bar stool, taking a long pull from the glass, draining the contents.

"That shouldn't be too much of a problem, though," Lyons added, "just damned inconvenient, having to watch where you step and looking overhead. I suppose you can always dispose of the slithering vermin yourself should the need arise. Just do be careful. Malaya has over one hundred thirty species, you know."

This time the drink sputtered across the bar with Indiana coughing in acute distress. Carveth beat a helping hand upon his back. "I say, old boy, are you quite all right?"

The archeologist held up a vertical palm, taking a deep color-restoring breath. "I'm fine and I'm sure everything will be fine."

"Splendid! Fine is fine. Everything will be ready tomorrow. Six a.m. sharp at the Jahore railway station."

* * *

It was going to be an early morning so after Carveth left, Indy decided to call it a night. Actually, he called the entire evening a disaster. As he fumbled with the keys to his hotel lock, he thought, *What else could go wrong?* Murphy and his laws were working overtime. Upon opening his door, he discovered most of the room in a shambles. *Most* of the room. Those few areas that hadn't been disturbed were the tip-off. His eyes shifted toward the hinges as he abruptly shoved on the door with all his weight, eliciting a loud, satisfying "Oomph!" from the other side. He yanked the door back, reaching for the intruder behind it, then swung with his fist, connecting with the jaw of the big Oriental bodyguard from downstairs. The guard barely flinched while Indy's hand throbbed from the impact. The archeologist then went for the solar plexus, further bruising his knuckles with several quick, successive punches. The guard just smiled and Indy realized he was in big trouble.

"Oh, shit," he muttered, a distraught look on his face as the big man wrapped a powerful hand around Indiana's neck, entwining fat fingers in the shirt collar and lifting the professor off the floor. With his typical disregard for the rules of fair fighting, Jones brought his knee up for a crippling shot at his attacker's groin. *That* didn't make the guard smile. Howling a Chinese malediction, he instinctively let go, with Indy landing on his rear in an ungraceful heap. Jones scrambled to his feet, trying to put as much space as he could between him and this Peking King Kong.

Recovered, his intruder was now really angry; the slanted eyes narrowed as they centered on Doctor Jones. The two circled like sumo wrestlers, each gauging the other's strengths and weaknesses. Indy didn't like the odds and went for his revolver, choosing to even out the game with a little Smith & Wesson persuasion, but the gun wasn't in his pocket! His eyes frantically searched the floor even as the guard suddenly charged like an enraged elephant. Jones just barely managed to sideslip, booting the man in the rear as he passed. The guard went crashing down onto the bed which went crashing down to the floor; splintered wood, bed linen and mosquito netting flying in all directions. Tangled in the sheets, he went rolling off onto the floor while Indy urgently searched for the gun or his bullwhip in the wreckage of the room. Unable to find either in those few safe seconds, he hefted up a chair instead, but two cloth-covered arms blindly reached out, grabbed Indy's ankles and brought him down.

There ensued a struggle with both of them hampered by the voluminous folds of cloth, rolling and twisting with neither of them able to land a solid punch.

They bumped against a solid surface where Indy felt the weight of his opponent disappear as the guard angrily tore away the material. Jones threw aside what was left of his share of the sheets, discovering to his extreme consternation that he was trapped between two large, unmoveable furniture pieces with the balcony French doors behind him. His assailant was standing like a megalith in front of him. Indy half grinned. "I don't suppose we could settle this over a game of Chinese checkers?" The towering Chinaman bared white teeth in sadistic anticipation. Indy's face fell. "I didn't think so."

Snorting like a bull in an arena, he charged the American again. Indy had nowhere to run. At the very last minute, with what looked like a freight train bearing down on him, the archeologist flattened out on the floor. Mei Ling's number one boy lunged forward, meeting empty air and crashed head first through the panes of glass. His foot solidly connected with Indiana's ribs as he tripped over the prone body. The momentum kept him going and he finished with a rather spectacular fall over the ornate balcony railing. A surprised and terrified, "Aiyyee!" could be heard all the way down to the bushes three stories below.

The room itself was suddenly filled with people pouring in the doorway; gaping guests, bus boys...the hotel manager. Indy groaned as he tried to sit up. His arm shot across his chest, splinting his right flank as an attempt at a deep breath sent a sharp eye-crossing pain through his ribs. Amidst the babbling crowd, all wanting to know what the bloody hell was going on, Jones looked up to see the disapproving face of a member of the Colonial Police.

* * *

"Doctor Jones," said the physician in the emergency area of the Singapore hospital, "you're the proud owner of three badly bruised and bent ribs." He finished wrapping the thick, tight gauze strips around the professor's chest. "I don't know what you were doing when you sustained this, but I'd advise you *not* to do it again. I'd also advise lots of rest and absolutely nothing strenuous."

Jones gingerly eased himself off the table. "Right," he replied, reaching for his shirt. The stretching move produced an involuntary audible complaint of pain.

"Hmmm," observed the doctor in the manner of all doctors. "It seems you're going to be somewhat uncomfortable for a few days." Opening a glassed-in cabinet, he removed a small bottle of pills. "Here," he handed them to Indiana who eyed them dubiously, but pocketed them anyway. "Take one or two as you need them."

"Thanks," said the patient.

Outside the emergency door, Indiana found his police escort, silently standing like some ancient temple sentinel, still waiting to take him in for questioning.

* * *

Still dressed in the tux, somewhat the less for wear--as was he--Indiana paced the office of the Singapore Police Inspector. His tie dangled half-in, half-out of a rumpled jacket pocket and he had barely attempted to tuck the shirt back into his pants.

The Inspector, Sir Percy Withrop, was old order British with a long and distinguished career in the service of His Majesty. He was now happily content to flit about in Singapore high society while maintaining the image that he had Singapore's criminal element well under control. Too much Gordon's Gin had allowed a pot belly to form over a once trim military physique. He perused the professor's passport, adjusting a pair of wire-rimmed glasses on his nose, then smoothing a magnificent well-cared-for mustache.

"Doctor Indiana Jones," he stated unnecessarily. Indiana already knew what name was on the passport. "I believe I may have heard of you. An archeologist? Weren't you rather prominently involved in that delightfully sordid scandal in Madagascar last year? I seem to remember overhearing something of the sort the last time I was in London. The Sultan was most displeased, I understand."

Indiana cringed, realizing for the first time just how far news of that particular incident had travelled. "It wasn't my fault," he answered impatiently, "and neither was this evening." He held out his hand, waiting for the official to return the booklet, but the man continued to flip the pages.

"You have been to some interesting places, Doctor Jones. You say you have no idea why anyone would want to search your room?"

"No." Indy held his aching ribs as he paced. He had gone through everything that had occurred, paring down the details to bare facts. His own feelings, observations and conclusions were none of the Inspector's business. But the man, in typical police fashion, had wanted to go over the story again.

"Or kill the Dragon Lady?" He looked for a give-away reaction.

Indy did a double take. "Who?"

Not getting the reaction he wanted, Withrop looked annoyed. "The woman whose life you apparently saved. Though I'm not too sure you did the rest of Malaya and particularly Singapore any favor by doing so." He got up, hands behind his back, pacing the room himself. "Her name is Mei Ling Chang, but the locals call her Dragon Lady. I understand it's a title of respect, but I can't fathom the Oriental mind. She's certainly not done anything worthy of any respect that I know of. In fact, it should be just the opposite. We think she may be the leader of a black market fencing operation, a Tong secret society with pirate ties that has frankly baffled our every attempt at cleaning it up. Your description of your attacker this evening sounds suspiciously like Lei Hiao, one of her strong arms. There was no trace of him, by the way."

"Oh, wonderful," Indy groused. "What about a Malay called Sahar?"

"That one!" Sir Percy harrumphed in frustration. "London had Jack the Ripper, Doctor Jones. Singapore has Sahar, though knowing his identity makes him no easier to catch. I swear he's a black wraith who disappears back into hell everytime we come close to catching him. And now street talk has it that he's very close to getting his hands on the Peking Dragon Eyes and the locals are already speaking of him in reverent terms. Just what we bloody need!"

Indiana's heart skipped a beat. "The Dragon Eyes..." He rested a palm on the desk. "Are you sure?" His voice had gone up a full octave.

"You've heard of them then? But, of course," he answered his own question, "this is your field of expertise. I had to wire London to find out what the blue blazes our informant was talking about. The information they sent back was painfully meager. What can you tell me?"

"Not much, I'm afraid." Actually, he knew quite a bit more than not much and the news that the Dragon Eyes had surfaced again filled him with a familiar thrill. The pain in his ribs became secondary to the fire in his veins. "Two near-identical fire opals," he lectured, using his hands to illustrate the size and shape, "about goose egg size with a vertical strip of green olivine running through the center of each. The first mention of them in recorded history was woven into a Peking embroidery done during the reign of Emperor Huang Ti, around 2500 B.C." Indy seemed to come alive with charged excitement. "They were a vital part of the Lung Wang cult--the Dragon Kings if you will--and used primarily to awaken or call forth the spirit of the Kings. The priests of the cult were a very influential bunch in the Chinese Imperial Court. Ownership of the Eyes was reputed to create feelings of superiority, invincibility, domination, with an accompanying charismatic effect on people, giving the ability to influence, command and control."

Sir Percy looked skeptical. Undaunted, the professor finished his 'lesson.' "Mention of them has appeared and disappeared in conjunction with powerful men over the centuries. Genghis Khan was supposed to have had them. Alexander the Great, Merlin, Napoleon, to name the best examples." Indy was practically breathless, his pulse rate increasing at the very thought. The Peking Dragon Eyes...perhaps Nurhachi could wait a little longer to be found.

"What utter rubbish," replied Withrop. "Malaya abounds in religions, cults, and mysteries. The Chinese are the worst of the lot, attaching a mystic meaning to every happening and a god for anything you can name." He returned to his desk, shuffling papers, busying himself with things he *could* understand.

The scientist wanted to mention that the Chinese culture had endured for thousands of years. Something the British Empire, for all its far-flung possessions and pragmatic thinking, had yet to manage successfully. He decided against further confrontation, having had enough for one evening. "I tend to keep an open mind on things like this, Sir Withrop," he said, opting for a low profile.

"I have more down to earth concerns. Like pirates and slave traders."

"You do seem to have your problems."

The Inspector handed back the passport. "Yes, and I certainly don't need any help in creating new ones. Might I ask how much longer you expect to be in Singapore? At the rate you are going, I may have to put my staff on overtime to keep pace with you."

Jones pocketed the essential document, ignoring the dig. "I'll be leaving for Malacca in the morning." He checked his watch and sighed. "In a few hours as a matter of fact."

* * *

The next morning came all too quickly. With little sleep under his belt, but lots of tight gauze, Indiana arrived at the Jahore railway station which marked the dividing line between civilized Singapore and the Malayan jungle. The gauze, the heat and the humidity had already caused a vertical line of sweat to appear down the back of his shirt. His weathered leather jacket lay draped over a battered suitcase while the well-worn fedora was perched on his head, tilted back as far as it would go without actually falling off. It took only a few minutes before he rolled his sleeves up and opened the shirt down another button.

He soon found Carveth by a substantial pile of boxes and canvas bags, checking off items on a notepad. Indy set his suitcase alongside the rest. Lyons raised an eyebrow, looking rather aghast at Indiana's very casual attire. A civilized traveler wore crisp duck cloth and a pith helmet, at the very least. The man hadn't even bothered to shave! But Jones was an American, Carveth reminded himself, could hardly be called civilized. That bullwhip was a case in point...utterly barbaric.

"Doctor Jones," he began, "I hope you don't mind, but I've taken the liberty of adding a few essentials to your requested list of supplies. Extra quinine. Malaria is quite rampant around here." Indiana didn't bother telling him that he had already had the disease. "A goodly supply of matches and cigarettes for the leeches. They can be quite fierce. Can you shoot?"

"What?" Indiana had been only half-listening as he was still half-asleep. The lack of same plus an uncomfortable rickshaw ride to the station had not put him in the best of moods.

"I asked, 'can you shoot?' I daresay, some sort of firearm is imperative in the jungle."

"I have a gun," he replied somewhat sarcastically, indicating the holster at his hip.

"Ah, yes, so you do."

Jones, the traveler, took a peek at Carveth's checklist, shaking his head. "Is all this really necessary? I'm used to travelling light."

"This *is* travelling light! I've pared you down to the basic necessities."

Sighing wearily, Indy refrained from making an issue over the inclusion of a tea service which could hardly be called a basic necessity--unless you were British. The tea service, as well as a lot of other things, would be left behind shortly after leaving Carveth.

Lyons coughed nervously, which Indy recognized as a prelude to another profound statement from the pompous Englishman. "I also had to make one other last minute change." He paused--either from fear or effect, Jones wasn't sure. "Your guide. There was a...small problem with the first one." He looked quite contrite and hastened to extoll the new guide's virtues. "He's half-Chinese and half-Dutch, but knows the Malayan jungle like a native born. I have found him to be absolutely reliable and trustworthy. Ahh!" he exclaimed, pointing down the road. "There, you see, right on time." The scientist saw a small Chinese man coming their way with a straggling retinue of coolies and Malay carriers behind him. "He's really very handy, can speak several dialects. I even have my suspicions that he has a thumb or two in the black market pie. Some of the items he has managed to secure for me have been...well, as scarce as hen's teeth."

Indy scowled. Was it his imagination or was Lyons pushing this guide just a little too eagerly? He didn't get the chance to voice his own suspicions before the group was upon them. Up close, the guide had a smattering of Western facial features. He wore a bright Malayan print shirt with coolie pants and sneakers.

"Doctor Jones," introduced Carveth, "this is Wu Han. I place you in his capable hands. Have a jolly trip, then!" Jones felt like saying, 'Thanks, Mom,' to Carveth's departing back.

Wu Han had a quick smile with bright, eager eyes that were more than just a little apprehensive. "What does *Tuan* Jones wish of Wu Han?" he asked timidly.

The archeologist laid a hand on the slim Chinaman's shoulder. "The first thing is not to call me *Tuan*. My friends call me Indy."

* * *

Just an hour's worth of traveling and the jungle swallowed them up; lush, verdant, hot and humid. The ground was damp and springy, full of roots and decaying leaves; the atmosphere like that of a hot house. Indiana wiped running sweat off his forehead as he looked up...and up. Casuarinas and banyon trees, up to one hundred feet tall, formed a natural canopy, letting in only isolated areas of sunlight. They shot up straight and smooth before branching out into large cabbage like tops. Ferns, mosses, orchids, and other parasitic plants in countless variety covered the trunks from top to bottom. Wu Han walked alongside Indiana pointing out the immense rope-like vines that passed from tree to tree, up and down, some of them six hundred feet long, binding the jungle into one big tangle.

Carveth had been right; the guide was a veritable wealth of information. "Know anything about the Dragon Lady, Wu Han?" Indy asked during a lull in the conversation, hoping to tap that informational wealth. The question, coming out of left field like that, caught the guide unawares. He looked around as if expecting a dozen listening ears, but the carriers were too absorbed with hacking through the undergrowth, using the ultra-sharp perangs or large knives they carried. Wu Han performed several quick hand motions which Indy recognized as a cross between a Christian benediction and a Chinese gesture meant to ward off evil spirts. He wasn't taking any chances; better to cover all bets.

"Very powerful," he admonished. "Indy would be wise not to become involved with such a one."

"Too late on that. And wise is the last thing I've ever been accused of."

Wu Han looked around again, this time expecting eyes to be watching from behind every buttressed root, but the only signs of life were the calls of hornbills and the far-off hoots of monkeys. He craned up to whisper in the American's ear. Indy's eyes went wide. "Pirates, huh?" Wu Han looked stricken and shushed his charge in healthy fear for his unworthy, miserable life. Unworthy and miserable, maybe, but it was the only one Wu Han had.

* * *

The first night they camped they set up the tents and mosquito netting by a river. The darkness was intense outside the firelit circle as the jungle became alive with sounds; countless frogs, crickets, quarreling monkey chatter. The air itself grew cooler and fireflies came out, blinking and flashing by the hundreds.

Sitting by the fire in a canvas folding chair, with his long legs stretched out in front, Indy gave a salute and a thank you toast to the absent Mr. Lyons as he poured himself a shot of Jack Daniels. There was traveling light and there was traveling comfortable. Right then and there, traveling comfortable was not such a bad British custom. This trip might not be as bad as anticipated.

He was feeling decidedly mellow when a low feline roar was heard in the distance. Indy noticed the carriers stirring restlessly as they huddled closer to their fire and a few picked up their perangs, placing them within easy reach. They had set up their own campsite, away from his, cooking their meals in little, individual brass pots. He regretted the separation of *Taun* and servant as the only way to really discover a country was to talk with its lower classes. Lower in wealth and social standing maybe, but richer in folklore and customs. Despite a few friendly overtures on his part, the coolies and Malays steadfastly treated him with a silent deference.

"Sounds like a tiger in the area," Indy commented, making what he thought was idle mealtime chatter to Wu Han who was clearing away the dinner dishes. Wu Han started though, dropping the plates with a loud clatter. "That's one way of scaring him off, Indy drily added.

Frightened, Wu Han reverted to speaking Malayan, as much for the carriers as for himself. *"Jangan! Gila Betul!"* ("Don't! You are certainly crazy!") "You mustn't mention the tiger. He will hear you and come for dinner!"

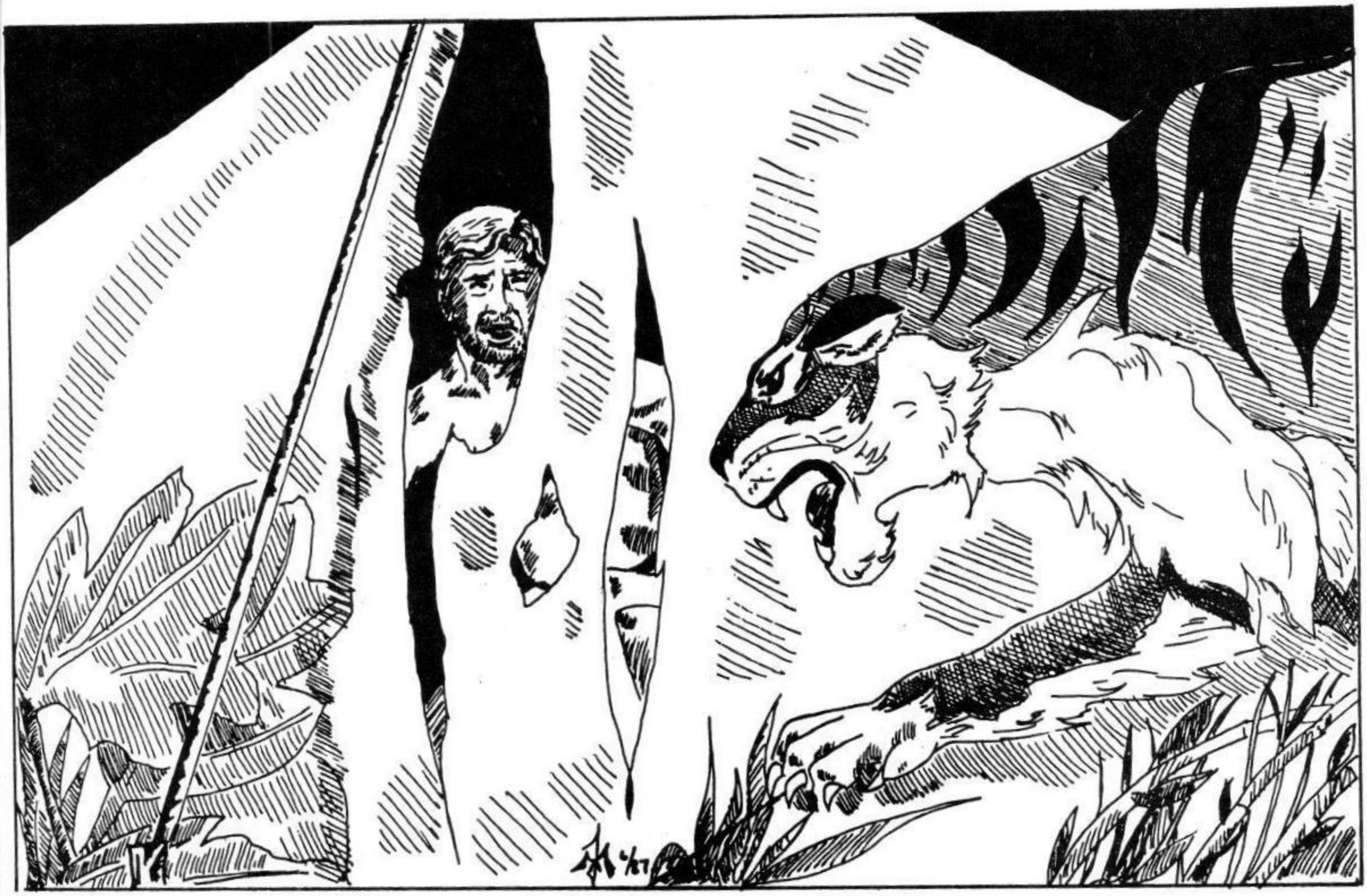
The professor mentally kicked himself and put an F on his test paper for not remembering that the Malays were terrified of tigers. The animal was generally only referred to in terms of respect, such as 'His Lordship,' or, perhaps, 'the old gentleman.' To mention the word *rimau*, or tiger, was to invite his presence with predictably disastrous results.

Wu Han's eyes were fearful and lowered while his expression was one of anxiety and nervousness as if expecting to be scolded for his outburst. Indy had no such intentions. Pathological fear was something he understood. In fact, he sought to calm the guide down without further injury to the Oriental ego. "You know, you might be right. You better set up your cot in my tent tonight. You know the jungle better than I do. I'd sleep better and feel safer."

It wasn't long after, needing to catch up on shut-eye, that Indiana retired early. Inside the tent, he found that Wu Han had rearranged things to accommodate the extra cot. The bed linen was turned down and the weary scientist again thanked Carveth...real feather pillows. He sat down, wiggling out of the shirt, his abused ribs complaining under the gauze. Even after he lay down, they continued to complain, making sleep fitfully difficult. Impossible, actually, so after an hour of throbbing discomfort, Indy got up, looking enviously at Wu Han sleeping soundly on the other side. He went to his suitcase, pawing for the bottle of painkillers the Singapore doctor had given him.

Suddenly, he stood very still, cocking his head to one side and not daring to move a muscle. There was a sound, a soft snuffling outside the tent. His hand reached for the holster that he had placed on a crate and encountered... nothing. No holster, no crate even! Frantically, with as little noise or movement as possible, he felt around for the weapon. Damn! Where was it? He knew he left it around there somewhere. "Wu Han," he whispered, shaking the guide's shoulder then placing a hand over his mouth when the eyes opened. "Not a sound. We've got company. My gun," he urgently hissed. "Where's my gun?"

With that a huge paw raked down the side of the tent on Wu Han's side, tearing the canvas as if it were tissue paper and the snarling head of a tiger appeared in the opening. Wu Han went white with sheer, utter terror in his heart and soul, then rolled off the cot onto the floor. The paw reached out again, this time swiping at Indiana's chest. "Jesus!" he exclaimed, looking down as blood began to seep through the now shredded, tattered strips of gauze.



With the gun nowhere to be found, he snatched a pillow instead, smacking the tiger square in the face with it. Catching the pillow in his paws, the cat began to eat it, but the pillow was full of feathers which went down its throat. Spitting and sneezing, the animal backed out of the tent and began clawing at its mouth to get rid of the choking, fluttering objects.

Outside in the camp, the carriers were screaming and disappearing in half a dozen different directions as the tiger roared in pure rage. Twin yellow eyes blazed, picking up a glowing reflection from the dying flames of the campfire. Frustrated, it sought revenge for the pillow outrage and looked for a victim, centering on Wu Han, who had just crawled out of the tent. The cat went down in a stalking crouch, setting its mind on a Dutch/Chinese take-out dinner.

Jones, meanwhile, was still inside, turning the place upside down in a vain effort to locate the still missing gun. He looked up through the hole in the tent just in time to see Wu Han shinny up the nearest tree, with the tiger in hot pursuit.

"Indy!" he hollered as the cat's claws missed his rear end by inches. The cat stood on its hind legs, braced against the tree and swiped for all it was worth at the terrified, hysterically babbling Chinaman. In another minute, it would be climbing.

No gun, thought the archeologist as he ran outside. No more pillows either. Then he had an idea--a very stupid idea, but when desperate... Now if the tiger would just cooperate. Trying not to think about the consequences if he failed, he grabbed one of the gleaming native perangs and snuck up behind the animal. If a twig should snap... Wu Han was awestruck and wide-eyed when he realized what Indy was attempting to do, then realized he could help. He started taunting the animal, calling it names, throwing down leaves and branches, keeping its ferocious attention on him.

The hair on the back of his neck was standing up when Indy was finally close enough. He swung the long strong blade as hard as he could, aiming for the base of the cat's skull. The impact almost broke his arm. The tiger screamed in feline agony as the perang severed the spinal cord, killing the cat instantly. It fell backwards, knocking into Indiana and pinning him to the ground, then lay still and heavy across his chest.

Wu Han jumped out of the tree and with his help in pushing the body over, Jones was able to wiggle out from under the potentially fatal embrace. Slowly, cautiously, the carriers came crawling out of their hiding places, crowding around and remarking upon the size, speed and strength of not only the tiger, but also of *Taun* Jones.

Taun Jones was beat. With a low groan of pain, he tried to stand up. Unable to find the needed leverage, he faltered for a second, but then there was a small, but surprisingly strong hand under his arm, helping him up. "Come," Wu Han gestured, making it seem almost an order. "The scratches must be cleaned."

Outside the tent, Indy allowed him to unwrap the gauze. The guide had a deft, sure touch and a sudden no-nonsense manner. He seemed more assured, more competent, more concerned and serious, almost as if the eager guide persona had been just that...a persona, an act for the typical naive American. Doctor Jones had proven himself to be neither typical nor naive.

With the last strip gone, Wu Han winced, as did Indiana, for the flank area had more mingling colors than an impressionistic painting over which the tiger had laid four, deep, yet neat slashes in the skin. Holding his arm over his head to better view the parallel marks, the professor shuddered to think what the damage would have been had the gauze not been there. Wu Han poured copious amounts of water over the scratches, trying to wash out the debris left behind by the tiger. A big cat's claws were repositories for all manner of decaying material and a cat scratch was almost guaranteed to become infected. The man of science knew this, realizing water was not going to be enough. With real regret and an anticipatory gritting of teeth, he handed the bottle of Jack Daniels to Wu Han.

"It will sting and burn," the guide warned as he took the top off.

"Tell me something I don't know," muttered Indy.

Sting and burn it did. Jones clamped a hand around a tree branch and squeezed his eyes tight enough to see paisley fireworks as the liquor sloshed through the open cuts. He didn't know which hurt more; the actual pain or the waste of the Jack Daniels. The pain won. "Sonofabitch," he exclaimed, holding his breath, then letting it out in a long slow exhale as the effects of the alcohol subsided.

"My life is yours forever, Indiana Jones," said Wu Han as he was wrapping light bandages around the archeologist's rib cage. "Ask of me anything."

Indy smiled somewhat grimly. "A fast trip to Malacca is about all I need right now." Wu Han split the gauze and tied a fastening knot. "...and a decent night's sleep." He sighed in resigned disgust at the shredded remains of the tent.

"A thousand forgivings, but this one thinks you are very crazy for trying to fight a tiger with a pillow."

Indy got up to go back into the tent anyway. The netting could be patched for the night. "I've been called that before." He groaned. "I'm beginning to believe it." He was suddenly aware of the carriers clustered around, watching him. "Okay," he addressed the group, "go on back to sleep. Bar is closed... literally. Entertainment is over for the night."

But it wasn't. Not for Indiana, anyway. When he ducked back into the tent, there was a small shiny green snake hanging from the overhead pole. Its head wavered back and forth as the forked tongue flicked out only inches from Indy's nose. His eyes crossed, then went wide and with a choking breath, he backed out instantly.

Wu Han stared as the color drained out of the scientist, as Indy repeatedly swallowed in abject fear. Not the tiger, nor the pain had caused such a reaction. Whatever was in that tent couldn't be any worse than a tiger so he went in, emerging several seconds later holding the writhing, wiggling reptile behind the head. Jones backed away, putting lots of space between himself and Wu Han's 'catch.'

The Chinaman looked at the snake, then looked at the archeologist. "Indy is afraid of snakes?" he asked rather incredulously.

The scientist looked chagrined and slightly annoyed. "Yes, Indy is afraid of snakes!" he confessed, then hoping to save some face, added, "Just like you are of tigers!"

Wu Han digested this as he threw the serpent far into the jungle. "If Indy will take care of the tigers," he offered with a warm smile and a shared secret, "Wu Han will take care of the snakes."

"It's a deal."

* * *

The next morning, Indiana Jones woke with not only his ribs aching, but every other bone he possessed as well. 'Nothing strenuous,' the doctor had ordered. Right. After that first fun evening, he expected the rest of the trip to be as eventful, but the few days went by without further incident or mishap. It was almost pleasant, as after the tiger attack, the atmosphere in the camp became less tense. The Malays regarded the jungle with superstitious awe and dread. The death of the tiger seemed to dispel those fears. Each of the men wore a claw from the tiger on a cord around his neck. It was considered a powerful talisman against future encounters. Indy himself was privileged to listen to the tales told by the coolies and the Malays around the evening fire. To their delight and Indy's pleasure, he added his own, unconsciously creating a classroom and weaving archeological spells as he recounted some of his discoveries.

In the mornings, the Malays would supplant the supplies with mangosteens and coconuts collected in the jungle. On the last day, they even ran into a ripened durian tree which the carriers took as a sure sign that *Taun* Jones would be successful in Malacca.

The professor was bent over a wash basin when Wu Han entered the tent, carrying one of the large spikey, green fruits. "I bring you durian for breakfast, Indy!" he announced, looking extremely pleased with himself. Indiana straightened up, wiping away the beads of water with a long narrow towel that was draped around his neck. Another second and he screwed up his face, holding his nose.

"Phew! You certainly have!"

The durian was native to Malaya and only Malaya. It smelled like mixture of turpentine and rotting onions, but when opened,contained about eight or nine seeds about the size of chestnuts which were covered with a thick, sweet custard that tasted like sherry and almonds. Eating a durian was a very messy business because the seeds were taken in the hands and the custard sucked off, resulting in much licking of fingers. Indy sighed, resigning himself to washing all over again.

"We reach Malacca tomorrow, don't we?" Jones asked, while diving into the innards of the putrid smelling, but delicious fruit. Wu Han nodded, looking a little downcast. He knew that Malacca was where he and Indiana would part company. The archeologist gave him a sly look from the corner of his eye. "I could use a good friend in Malacca." He smiled knowingly. "Know where I could find one?"

Wu Han's grin was all the answer Indy needed.

* * *

Malacca! It stood on the junction of maritime routes linking the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea and for centuries, it was the rendevous port for sailing ships from many seafaring nations. These ships would unload the rich spices of the East; camphor, cloves and sandlewood. Her docks used to groan from the weight of silks, carpets and porcelain from India. The European merchants would bring silver, gold and precious gems for trading. And in Lo Feng's shop on Jonker Street, many of these treasures could still be found...if one knew how and what to offer.

Once the greatest city in southeast Asia, Malacca now had an almost medieval air; with quaint old buildings and an oft-bridged river cutting through its center. It was now also a drawing card for some of the Orient's human flotsam. Indiana and Wu Han were aware of being watched as they made their way through the narrow streets to Lo Feng's, but only gave the shifty glances minimum notice. The factor of two plus his whip and the gun in plain view were keeping the local lowlife at a distance. Something about the assured walk made them think twice about messing with the tall Westerner. There was always the possibility that he was carrying something valuable in the bag at his side, but highly unlikely as it swung too free.

Maybe the whip and the gun intimidated some, but it didn't deter the street children. Indy and Wu Han had acquired a small rag-tag following, hoping for a handout. Even though he didn't look like a tourist, he was a round-eye and in their experience, all round-eyes were rich. They chattered in broken English, giggling at a safe distance, unsure about his reaction or response. Jones glanced back at his 'following.'

"I was hoping to pop in on Lo Feng unannounced," he said to Wu Han.

"I will chase them away."

He grabbed his arm. "No. You never know when you are going to need some small help." He turned around. The children immediately scattered, disappearing into the alleyways. "Okay, kids," he said, reaching into his pockets, "here's the deal." It took only a second for the short forms to reappear, gathering around Indy with blatant, outstretched hands. He bent down on one knee to establish an eye-level rapport. As he placed the coins in the grimy little palms, he watched their faces; dark, shiny eyes and delighted smiles. They would not go hungry tonight. "I'm going to Lo Feng's to find something very special, but I want it to be a surprise and a secret. Do you think you could keep out a watch for me...and not be seen?" The small heads bobbled in agreement, eager to accept the challenge and play the game. Indy stood up as his makeshift Baker Street Irregulars took off.

Jonker Street, their destination, was near the water front market where life was never dull nor quiet. It was a center of frenetic activity. The odors and sounds of a mixed humanity hit him in waves. There was the headiness of incense sticks at every vendor's stall; the smell of spicy Indian curries or Chinese port sticks. Live chickens squawked in useless protest as they were hung upside down for weighing, while pigs grunted behind flimsy pens. Rows upon rows of silver fish were laid out for viewing as were artistic towers of stacked fruit. And everywhere, at every corner, were the haggling, bargaining shoppers.

They turned into Jonker Street, scarcely more than an alley. Overhead were the lines of laundry for dozens of families living in the buildings. The street were all shops; the cobbler, the coffin maker, antique, and apothecary stores. Here was Lo Feng's shop. Here Indiana felt a sudden tug on his pants leg. Like a shadow, the boy had emerged from a doorway. Wu Han watched Indy's face portray interest, then apprehension, then annoyance as the child whispered in his ear. Jones tousled the small head as he stood up. "Dragon Lady is in the shop," he stated, looking down the street, "wish company."

Wu Han turned pale. "I go join small help." He made to follow the boy, but Indy grabbed his shirt collar, holding him back.

"You go to Lo Feng's back door. Wait for me there. Here, take this." He handed over his gun. "You know how to use it?"

Wu Han nodded. "Indy?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful."

"Right."

They split up with Indy dashing door to door to the shop. Thoughts of Mei Ling Chang also dashed through his mind. Was it just coincidence that she was here at the same time or were they two souls destined to meet; whose lives would intermittently come together and intertwine? Intertwining wasn't quite what he had in mind. Close, but not quite.

Then he saw her, coming out of Lo Feng's. She was wearing a silver-white cheong sam, the traditional tight-fitting Chinese dress, with a high side slit and heels. In the dark alley, she seemed to glow with her own light. He did an appreciative double-take before ducking into a doorway.

Outside the shop was one of Indy's 'scouts,' pretending to be quite blind and begging with a shard of pottery instantly converted into an alms bowl. Jones grinned, wondering if this could be construed as corrupting the morals of a minor. From his concealed spot, he watched as Mei Ling found herself alone and apparently thought herself unobserved. She surreptiously dropped some money into the shard, then as the boy murmured his thanks, gently stroked the dirty face. Her own face mirrored a compassionate warmth and tenderness that jolted Indiana down to his shoelaces. The lady was not quite what she seemed. A half-minute later, Sahar left the shop, slamming the glassed door behind him. It was like a door slamming on Mei Ling, too. The coldness, the hardness returned as she spoke with the Malayan. The boy wisely faded into the background, disappearing underfoot and thanking the gods for his good fortune. His pocket actually jingled with coins this wonderful day and now he had information that he might sell for more.

Once Sahar and Mei Ling were out of sight, Indiana quickly covered the distance to the shop, slipping inside. It was a fascinating place, crammed floor-to-ceiling with objets d'art from every conceivable country and from all eras of history. He felt like a kid in a candy store as he saw Eskimo statuary, jade carvings, tapestries, and gold figurines. There were medieval suits of armor and Renaissance paintings; jewelry from Egypt and Ethiopia. It left him with a lump in his throat, though, when he realized that Lo Feng's real treasures were out of sight. He picked up a porcelain Foo Dog, reverently turning it over in his hands, while expecting Lo Feng to appear any moment and scold him. Where was the conniving shopkeeper? He went looking, quietly sweeping aside the beaded curtain that covered the doorway to the back room.

"Lo Feng?" he softly called, moving cautiously. "It's Doctor Indiana Jones."

A low, barely audible moan was his reply. He traced the sound to a pile of wooden boards and crates, finding the beaten body of Lo Feng behind it. The shopkeeper wasn't dead, but it was clear to Indy that the event was imminent. His hand came away sticky with blood as he dragged the old man out, then lifted him to a half-sitting position. The Oriental eyes fluttered as Jones cradled the bleeding head in the crook of his elbow.

"Indy?" It was Wu Han at the back door. Indy waved him in, motioning for him to keep quiet as Lo Feng's eyes opened to fix on the archeologist.

"Easy, revered one," Indy stated.

"The Dragon Eyes..." he rasped in ancient Mandarin, "...must destroy the Dragon Eyes."

Indiana's own irises deepened to a fanatical green. "Where are they?" he urgently asked, wanting the answer so badly he nearly shook the frail man. "Where?! How can I find... No...wait!!" But it was to no avail. Lo Feng died in Indiana's arms. "Damn!" he cursed, furious at the Chinaman's inability to hang on one more minute. Now he had neither the Dragon Eyes nor Nurhachi. He sighed, looking at the wrinkled and now peaceful face. "A safe journey into the great unknown mystery, Lo Feng," he wished, then laid the still body on the floor.

There was the sudden crack of wood behind him. Wu Han looked up, his eyes wide with terror, unable to do anything but croak weakly. Instead of turning, Indy dove to the right as the blade of an English broadsword came crashing down, missing him by mere molecules of air. The archeologist rolled to his feet, again facing Lei Haio who towered like a mountain in the cluttered storage space. This time, Haio had brought a friend who lunged at Wu Han. The guard was wearing only loose fitting pants tied around his tremendous waist. The long pirate hair was caught in a gold ring at his back. He swung the broadsword again, but Indy ducked as it flashed over his head. Instead, the blade struck and shattered half a dozen jars on the shelf behind, releasing powders and chemicals that blew into the air and spilt on the floor.

Weaving and ducking around chairs, shipping crates and a heavy wooden table, Jones continued to evade the heavy weapon. Enough of this...he went for his gun. His holster was empty...again! "Shit!" he said, remembering too late that he had given the revolver to Wu Han. Wu Han, though, couldn't use it either as he was using both hands to keep a gleaming kris knife from his throat, barely holding back the arm of the second pirate.

"Indy!"

"What do you want me to do?!" he yelled back as the sword flashed again, this time embedding itself into the tabletop. "You've got the gun!"

The sword was wedged between two tableboards, tight enough that not even Lei Hiao's strength could free it. Taking immediate advantage of the situation, Jones ducked under the guard's muscled arm, running to Wu Han's aid. He picked up a loose two-by-four, raising it over his head to bash his friend's assailant, but two huge arms suddenly wrapped around his chest. Lei Hiao squeezed.

"Not the ribs!" Indy pleaded, feeling his bones go snap, crackle and pop. "Not the ribs!"

Lei Haio squeezed harder, lifting the professor's feet off the floor. Unable to breathe, Jones felt himself blacking out. Desperate, he swung the two-by-four straight back over his head, where it landed with a solid thunk on Lei Haio's skull. At the same time, he swung his legs up then out, cracking Wu Han's attacker up the side of the head with both feet. The fellow toppled over like the Colossus of Rhodes, falling against a rack of dusty old bottles. The bottles crashed to the floor, mixing the liquid contents with the previously spilt powders. Noxious fumes began billowing from the combined substances, rapidly filling the room. Fighting became secondary to breathing, as coughing and gasping, all four men stumbled out the beaded doorway, then out into the street.

Barely recovered, with one hand holding his abused and battered ribs, Indy grabbed Wu Han under the arm and propelled him down the street. It took only a second for Lei Haio and partner to come after them.

"Very persistent," breathed Wu Han. "Might this one ask why?"

"The big one and I had a bit of a 'falling out' in Singapore," Indy answered. "I think he's still mad."

They ran through the confined alleys at breakneck speed, not really sure where they were going. With their pursuers getting closer, they suddenly came to a four-way cross street. Indy turned left...Wu Han turned right. A short sharp whistle made them both stop in their tracks, turn around, back up, and look at the third alternative direction. The whistle came from a boy who urgently waved them forward.

Behind them, Lei Haio shouted as he caught sight of his quarry. Indy and Wu Han took off again, following the advice of the child. They were two alleys down, when timed perfectly, two sets of clothesline filled end to end with laundry dropped from above on the two pirates. Indy's kids giggled out the windows as the two men flailed about in the jumble of clothing, becoming more entangled and enraged the more they struggled.

The archeologist and guide stopped for a scant second to mutually grin as they waved a quick thanks to their small help. A scant second was all they had, not even enough time to catch a breath. Time and breathing were for the carefree, the unhurried...the unpursued! Still traveling at a fast clip, they burst out of the narrow maze of streets right into the middle of the wharf market. Further running through the milling mass of humanity was a foregone conclusion. That is until their pursuers showed up behind them again. The pirates still trailed clinging bits of laundry, throwing them off with angry gestures. Lei Haio again shouted at Indiana.

"Oh, boy," muttered Jones.

"Big one awfully mad at you," volunteered Wu Han. "He say you..."

"Never mind! I know what he said! C'mon!" Indy dove into the teeming throng of shoppers, moving with all the grace, skill and finesses of a college linebacker. Instead of following, Wu Han grabbed a straw hat off a nearby table, quickly plopping it on his head. With his face tilted down and hands up his opposite sleeves, he instantly blended in. As the pirates ran past, his head came up and he started to follow them, figuring that he and Indy could somehow catch them in the middle. The table's owner had other ideas, though, angrily demanding payment for the hat while placing himself across Wu Han's path until such payment was made.

In the market, Doctor Jones had no such camouflage. He stood out like the proverbial sore thumb, his height and the fedora working to his disadvantage. What he needed was a little defensive blocking. Seeing a break in the wall of people, he unwound the whip. At the first crack, the people bleated in collective terror, then began scattering like a disrupted ant colony. With unerring accuracy, the whip wrapped around a table leg supporting a fruit stand. The multiple towers of produce came crashing down to the ground as Indy yanked back on the length of braided leather. Haio and friend, as well as half the market, hopped, skipped and jumped over the hundreds of oranges, coconuts, limes, and melons that went rolling every which way. The pirate's squinty eyes blazed with Oriental fury while he none too gently shoved innocent passersby out of the way.

Indy's whip snapped again. This time the rickety fence holding in a dozen pigs came down. The animals went squealing through the market, running under stalls and between human legs, knocking down people left and right. The chicken stand became the next casualty, as did Indy's whip, when someone stumbled against the unsteady table. The stacked crates tumbled to the ground, falling like a house of cards and entangling the twelve-foot stretch of the whip. It was unexpectedly torn from his hand. Meanwhile, the splintered, shattered crates were releasing twenty or more flapping fowl into the general melee. Feathers flew everywhere as Haio batted at the hysterically squawking birds as if they were a cloud of mosquitos.

The market was in an uproar thanks to the inimitable Doctor Jones, who himself was in a bit of a quandary. No gun, no whip, and as he looked back into the crowd, no Wu Han. He slowed, walking backwards for a few steps, hoping to catch sight of his friend. Suddenly, he backed up into someone. He whirled, intending to hastily apologize, but the apology caught in his throat. He was face to face with Sahar and Dragon Lady! She flashed him a shocked look of recognition, as surprised as he to be meeting. Their eyes met for an intense second before he executed a perfect one-eighty, only to see China's equivalent of Mount Everest bearing down on him. Caught...between a rock and a hard place.

He gulped once, then slowly turned around again to smile confidently at Mei Ling. "Hi!" he said lightly.

She seemed a bit taken back at first, but then the aloof, controlled mask settled in place. It didn't fool Indy one minute anymore. He nervously glanced back as Haio's rapid grunting grew louder and closer. With an instant, easy assessment of the situation, Mei Ling stopped the guard with the simple gesture of her palm held upright. Looking both enigmatic and unconsciously seductive at the same time, she smiled at Indiana. "Calling in my promise so soon, Doctor Jones?"

The hazel eyes flicked in Haio's grumbling direction. "The moment seemed right."

Sahar spoke. "Let Haio kill him."

Not far away, Wu Han was making belated fast time through the market confusion that was just starting to sort itself out. Following Indiana's path was as easy as following a trail of bread crumbs. Squashed fruit pulp littered the ground ahead of him. Then he had to dodge a squealing pig that suddenly darted in front of him, then dodge the chattering owner who was chasing after it. More market chaos led him to the remains of the chicken stand. The angry owner was attempting to salvage some of the crates, pulling foot after foot of brown rope through the slates of an almost intact cage. With wide eyes, Wu Han yanked it from his hands. It was Indiana's whip! Now worried, the guide frantically looked around for a sign of the archeologist, craning his head to see above the people, searching for the telltale fedora. Hanging onto the whip, he elbowed his way back into the mainstream crowd.

Meanwhile, Indy's fate was being hotly debated between Mei Ling and Sahar. "There is a Tong blood promise between us!" she argued.

"That promise does not include me," countered the Malayan. "I have no honor-bound vow to let him live." He fixed a cold, soulless stare on the life in question.

Jones really didn't feel like hanging around to see who won the argument. "I could leave and come back later," he lightheartedly suggested. It was a weak attempt as it was obvious that the two pirates on either side of him weren't going to let him go anywhere.

Mei Ling grew angry. "You have my express order to do so!" The ancient fire of ancestral Mandarins flared in her reply. "He goes free!"

It seemed like an impasse, but then Sahar abruptly backed down; too quickly and too easily for Indy's liking. "All right. Grant him his life if you must, but consider this. He was at the hotel...now he is here...and at Lo Feng's.

I would think you would want to know why. I say we take him with us."

That idea didn't thrill Indy at all. He tensed, getting ready to run, but Haio had anticipated the reaction. He surreptiously jabbed the end of a kris knife into Indy's back, pricking the skin at a point above the right kidney. Jones tensed even more, instantly and wisely tossing out any current plans of escape. For all his hulking, brainless mass, Lei Haio did have a literal way of getting his point across.

The fire still burned in Mei Ling as she thought over Sahar's reasoning. She gave Indiana a long hard look, finally letting a highly developed sense of self-preservation win out over a basic uneasiness. Reluctantly, she agreed to the compromise.

Noting the reluctance, Sahar sought to win her over further. "There is another advantage, Madam Chang." He became soothingly coercive, almost calmly compelling. So much so that even Indiana was starting to agree with him. "He is an archeologist, is he not? Perhaps he will know something of the temple that Lo Feng had no knowledge of."

Indy's eyebrows went up. "Temple?"

In the market, Wu Han turned a last corner, finally catching up with Indiana, but the scientist was being led away towards the wharf pilings and boat tie-ups. The small guide followed, trying to become even smaller as he darted and weaved unseen behind the numerous stacked cargos on the dock. Frustrated and helpless, he watched as they forced Indiana down a ladder and into a rowboat. Wu Han thought of the gun in his possession, but was afraid that he might hit Indy if he tried to use it. The professor's hands were tied behind his back before the pirates began rowing towards a merchant junk anchored far out into the harbor.

The Chinaman's heart sank, knowing that was the last he would ever see his friend. Then a finger poked his waist. The guide whirled, expecting a beggar or a thief, but finding instead a small boy, one of the ragamuffins he and Indy had befriended. The boy crooked a finger with one hand while holding out his palm with the other. Wu Han dug into his pockets and bent down. The boy began whispering in his ear while pointing at the merchant junk.

* * *

Indiana hadn't moved from the window for hours. He stood there with his arms folded on the ledge, looking out the bamboo bars at the great sleeping dragon. True, there was nothing to look at inside the locked bamboo enclosure, but even if the walls had been encrusted with precious gems, he still would have been looking out the window. The carving was mesmerizing. It pulled at him like the song of the sirens. His first sight of it as the pirates led him across the courtyard for the first time had almost been his undoing. He had stopped so abruptly it was as if his shoes had been nailed to the ground. *My God,* he had thought, feeling an adrenalin rush that threatened to blow a major artery, *a Lung Wang dragon! A whole damn complex, practically perfectly intact.* He had done a complete, incredulous, rather giddy three hundred-and-sixty degree turn, until the pirates graphically brought him back to the grim reality of his predicament with a crippling blow to his shoulder with a gun butt. They had no way of knowing that Indy's last intentions were of escaping.

He stared at the dragon, marvelling at the workmanship, his brain feverish at the thought of such a discovery. The lacquer on it hadn't faded or chipped, like time didn't exist inside the cave. If he could get word of this to Marcus, they'd both be set for life in the annals of archeology. The door to his bamboo prison creaked, then swung open. Wary, he straightened and backed up as the small area was filled with the muscled form of Lei Haio. Indy found himself wondering if the Chinaman could be the mortal/physical embodiment of any one of half a dozen curses laid on him by at least that many tribal witch doctors. Haio growled in Chinese, indicating that Jones was to precede him out the door.

"Oh, no," Indy deferred, motioning for the guard to take the lead. "Dumb and ugly first."

Whether or not Haio actually understood the insult was a moot point. It was clear from the Westerners' expression and tone of voice that it was not complimentary. He reacted by grabbing Indy and twisting an arm high behind the back, forcibly marching him out the door. His mistress wanted the American brought to her, and he would obey...for now. But he didn't like the idea and took his anger out on Indy.

* * *

After sending for Indiana, Mei Ling anxiously waited in the temple chamber that served as her quarters. The furniture was strictly makeshift, but the beautifully patterned walls with carvings and tiles made the room seem lavish. Several oil lamps flickered in the corners, throwing out shadows that danced on the walls like leaping goblins. Wearing a high-collar tunic and slim pants of deep blue satin, she stood in front of a burning votive candle, her folded hands just touching her chin, as if in reverent meditation. Mei Ling, though, had long ago cast aside any belief in a higher being, especially any that promised to help in times of need. Instead, an image of Indiana Jones filled her mind.

"I fear this man," she barely whispered, her throat dry at the thought of him. "He is a flame that threatens to consume me, an aura of power that will control my will." Her words became silent thoughts as footsteps approached the chamber. *Dare I face my fear?* she asked of herself.

A second later and the curtain across the doorway was thrust aside by Lei Haio who roughly shoved Indiana inside. The archeologist stumbled forward, breaking his momentum against a narrow wooden table. He immediately turned around to face the door, glaring in real anger at his nemesis. "I've had just about enough of you!" he pointed, his stance a clear challenge. Eager to accept it, Lei Haio grunted and lunged for the professor, but Mei Ling let out a furious command and the man stopped as if he had struck a wall.

"Wait outside," she instructed firmly. "If I need you, I will call." Eyes downcast, Haio defiantly grumbled under his breath. "Sahar is *not* the final word here!" she snapped. "Now go!"

"And good riddance! You ought to keep him in a cage, Mei Ling," Indy added, scowling at the door, "preferably with a live cobra."

She smiled in spite of herself, feeling a warm flush at his easy use of her first name. "For some reason, Lei Haio doesn't like you, Doctor Jones."

"The feeling is mutual, believe me." He took off the fedora, hanging it rather nonchalantly on a prominent, anatomically correct, fertility carving. "Your friend, Sahar, doesn't have too high an opinion of me either."

"He mistrusts you. He thinks I should have you killed, despite my promise."

"Nice guy," Indy muttered. Then for the first time since entering the room, Jones looked at her, his eyes as compelling as a cat's in the firelit surroundings. "What about you?" he asked softly. "What do you think of me?"

She flashed him a startled look, unprepared for the directness. "I...I have yet to form a final judgement. I will admit you're something of a puzzle, unlike most men I have to deal with." She nervously played with the toggle closing on her tunic. "May I offer you tea?" she suddenly asked as if to change the subject.

Indy nodded, moving to help himself, but she placed the filled cup on the table between them, preventing a more intimate contact. He sipped at the dark, fragrant liquid, watching her from over the rim of the cup and feeling oddly pleased by her efforts to maintain a physical as well as emotional barrier between them. It wasn't as if she didn't trust him; sending Lei Haio out of the room had proved that. The lady was interested, but fighting the idea. This was going to take careful, delicate work, thought Indy. He would have to treat her like an artifact and build a support structure before attempting any direct handling. Almost absentmindedly, he began running professional fingers over the walls. "You mean, men like Sahar?" he asked, while casually inspecting the room. It seemed coincidental that his archeological meanderings were decreasing the distance between them.

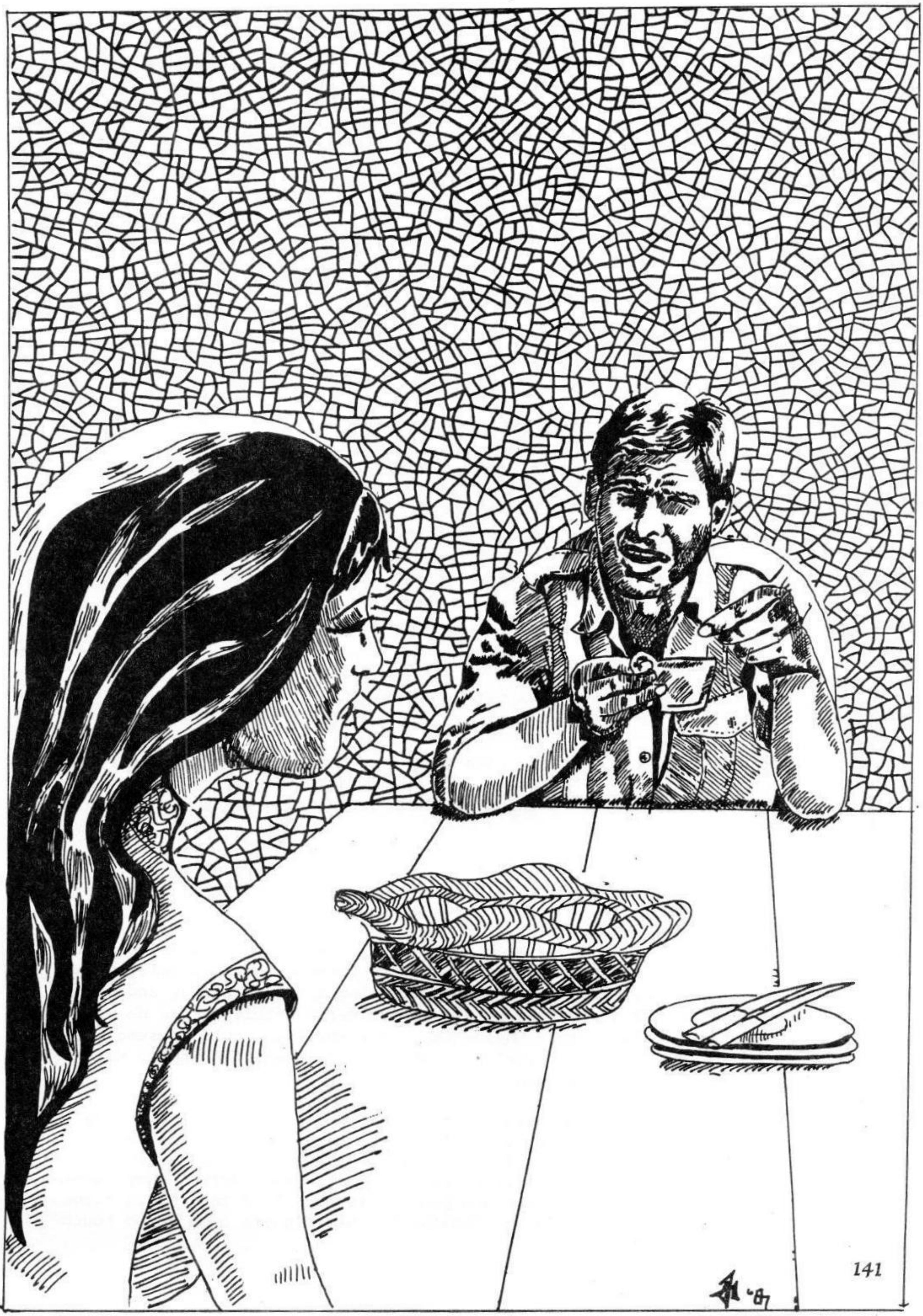
Like a chess piece on a game board, she countered-moved, unconsciously keeping a set space of separation. "Sahar is a business partner and that is all. Actually, he is becoming a problem. One that I shall soon have to deal with. He has changed," she spoke thoughtfully but with clear distress. "His manner has become...most persuasive."

"I wouldn't wait too long. I've got a feeling that he was behind the attempt on your life in Raffles." Indy also had a feeling, both fearful yet excited, that he knew what was causing the change in the pirate leader. If his suspicions were correct, they were in a lot of trouble.

"I know, but the time is not right. Certain...agreements require our mutual cooperation for a little while longer. But he has a point. He questions your motives in saving my life, as do I. What had you hoped to gain? Why would you risk so much?"

Indy scratched the back of his head, looking perplexed. "At this point, I would have to plead temporary insanity." He grew serious. "Does everything have to have a motive or a gain? Has life treated you that badly that you suspect everything?"

He apparently struck a raw nerve because she banged her own cup down on the table. "Life has taught me lessons, Doctor Jones. *This*," she indicated the eye patch, "is one of them!" The bitterness in her voice became an almost tangible thing. "The result of an attempted rape when I was ten. I killed the man, but not before he left me with a lifetime reminder of what one can expect in this world. Everything has a price!"



Jones inwardly felt for her, but didn't think that his sympathy or pity was the needed reply. She had enough pity for herself. "So you've gone through life basing all relationships on one bad experience?" He shook his head. "You must be very lonely, sweetheart."

She drew herself up, trying not to show how vulnerable she felt, trying not to think of the hours and the days when loneliness had been her only friend and worst tormentor. "It has served me well, so far. I am no longer groveling in the streets."

There wasn't much left for Indy to say, except something trite or a useless banality that would mean nothing. He was saved from the awkward moment by sudden screams out in the jungle. He looked confused, inclining his head towards the window.

"A punishment," she explained, wincing a little as another shrill cry split the night air. "Staked out over a patch of new bamboo shoots. The sprouts grow over an inch an hour and will grow right through his body." Indiana visibly flinched. "Perhaps needlessly painful and prolonged, I will agree, but on the other hand, there is nothing to fear from a quick painless death. As punishment for disobedience, it is a useless deterrent."

To Indiana, she seemed a bundle of contradictions. It was difficult to equate the woman who gave money to a blind child with this one who so casually condoned deliberate, physical torture. And she called *him* a puzzle?

"You disapprove?"

He shrugged, taking the easy way out. "If I do, does it matter?"

She acknowledge his obvious verbal parry with a nod and an attempt at continued hospitality. "More tea?"

He agreed, but it was with the idea of buying time. His concern over Sahar's recent change in personality had grown into sudden acute claustrophobia; a warning he usually listened to. Time to think of a way out and the window looked to be the only way.

Mei Ling continued talking as she turned to get the porcelain pot. "It does matter to a certain extent. To return to our beginning topic, I am now curious what kind of impression I have made on you?"

In those few seconds that he back was turned, Indy made his move, swiftly but silently going for the high square opening to freedom, but not swiftly enough. She turned around again, finding him a disconcerting six inches away and her breath caught in her throat. Green-gold eyes smoldered before her as he guilelessly held out the rounded cup. Smoldering...a flame that would consume her. He took a step closer. "I think you're a fascinating, beautiful woman, Mei Ling..." He paused. "...very beautiful."

For just an instant, as he held her gaze and wondered how he could have possibly left without knowing what it would feel like to hold her, he saw a flicker of a softer emotion on her face. A very vulnerable, wanting emotion. Then the instant passed and the emotion was gone; repressed, driven away, denied, rejected. She broke the eye contact and poured his tea, then once again turned around. Though she tried to hide it, Indiana saw her fingers come up to touch the eyepatch, then they clenched into a white-knuckled fist. So much pent up anger, hurt and frustration in that one not-so-simple gesture. Still keeping the artifact comparison, he knew she would crumble to dust in his hands if he wasn't careful.

When she once more looked at him, her features were controlled, but her mind and body were in a turmoil. With Indiana Jones the flame, Mei Ling felt very much the moth. Distance...she moved away from him...she needed distance. He was an aura of power that would control her will. "A flattering appraisal, Doctor, and admittedly an enjoyable discussion, but all this is not why I sent for you."

"Oh?" he said hopefully, thinking himself that they had talked enough. There were other forms of communication they could try.

"I confess to being at a loss of what to do with you."

He was about to suggest a few things, then realized what she meant. "Wait a minute! I thought you said..."

"I said I would give you your life. I said nothing about your freedom. I realize now it would be quite foolish of me to let you go."

"To let you both go!" Sahar swept aside the curtain, followed by Lei Haio who had obviously switched sides.

Reacting instantly, Indy made a break for it with one hand and leapt over the narrow table, but was stopped just short of the window, grabbed round an ankle and dragged down by Haio who took perverse pleasure in bending Indy's spinal cord into new and innovative positions. Mei Ling stood at her haughtiest, holding herself with all the regalness of a court empress. "There had better be an excellent reason for this intrusion," she seethed.

Sahar was a gleeful, fulfilled madman. "I don't need a reason! I don't need you! I have these!" He thrust out a hand and the Peking Dragon Eyes glowed in his palm. Iridescent blues, pinks and fiery reds swirled in two magnificent opals. The strip of green crystal olivine through the center of each did indeed make them look like eyes.

Indiana gasped, both from pain and from pleasure. The Dragon Eyes! "Sahar," he panted, "I wouldn't play with those if I..." He cried out, unable to finish as Lei Haio increased the pressure on his hold.

"Where did you get those?" Mei Ling whispered in awed tones, instantly entranced by the opals' beauty.

The Malay held a stone in each hand, letting the glow from the lamps increase the glow in the translucent gems. "Lo Feng. May he enjoy the eternal company of demons."

"I'm telling you," Indy tried again, "you don't know what you're dealing with..."

At a signal from the pirate leader, the guard gave Indy a savage chop across the back of the neck. Indy didn't move again.

"They will give me power and wealth, Doctor Jones," spoke Sahar to the unconscious prone figure. "That is all I need."

"You're a fool," Mei Ling stated contemptuously. "The Tong will kill you for this."

Anger flaring, Sahar backhanded her across the face. She cried out, staggering back from the vicious blow. He advanced on her, the kris knife again in his hand. "I think not. The Tong will soon take orders from me." A sadistic gleam flared in his cold eyes. "Perhaps I should give you another scar to match the one you have." He backed her up, the knife point only half an inch from her eye. "Perhaps I should give you several."

"Sahar," a pirate entered the chamber, "the courtyard stands ready."

He didn't move, just held the blade poised, enjoying the terror he had created in her features. "I do not have time for the slow death I had planned for you, but another method will serve just as well." He withdrew the knife. "Place them over the bamboo."

* * *

Indiana slowly awakened to the presence of something annoyingly sharp pressing into his groin, his shoulder and a spot right below his sternum. He tried to lazily turn over, but was quickly jolted into full alertness when he realized he was tied down, staked-out, spread-eagle, face-down on the ground. A few seconds of furiously struggling yielded nothing but raw, abraided skin on his wrists. A foot, large and heavy, suddenly stepped on the small of his back, pushing him down hard against the ground, and grinding the sharp points of young bamboo into his chest. Lei Haio chuckled maliciously, then went back to helping the other men tie down Mei Ling. She was putting up one hell of a fight.

"Offal!" she cried. "Spawn of a bat!!" Her nails raked down the face of one unfortunate pirate.

Despite his predicament, Jones couldn't help but smile. You could take the lady out of the streets, but you couldn't take the streets out of the lady. Not completely anyway.

"I'll see you stuffed in a pigskin when you die!!" Her teeth closed around the wrist of another as Lei Haio used his brute strength to manhandle her to the ground. He held her there while they tied her wrists and ankles to the stakes. It grimly reminded Indy of a rodeo calf-roping. Mei Ling continued to rage. "I'll have your manhood sliced off!!" she threatened.

"Send him to Madagascar," muttered Indy.

Checking the bindings one more time, their tormentors walked away, laughing and joking, leaving the jungle quiet, except for Mei Ling's rapid breathing and the omnipresent buzz of insects.

"I like your fighting style, sweetheart."

"For all the good it did me! I swear on my sacred ancestors," she said, "I'll haunt their nights for all eternity!" She pulled on the ropes holding her in place, but like Jones, was unable to budge the stakes.

The quiet returned, but not entirely. An almost imperceptible groaning could be heard; a very faint creaking, a murmuring. The sound of growing bamboo.

All other concerns forgotten, it commanded their complete attention as the rapidly growing shoots began pressing harder and the dire reality of their situation literally sank into their skin.

* * *

Back at the temple, Sahar stood on a balcony overlooking the courtyard which was ablaze with lanterns and torches. The light from the fires was reflected in the dragon's green/gold scales and the carving seemed to glow and ripple. The pirate crew was assembled in the courtyard, waiting in a thinned out group, waiting for the riches their leader had promised. Holding a stone in each hand, Sahar raised his arms high over his head, feeling the opals pour energy into his body, feeling them tingle in his palms. The opals' influence was strong on a mind already crazed with power and greed. They only amplified his delusions of grandeur. He had thoughts that he could do anything, control anyone. And why not, he reasoned? Was he not wiser and stronger than all men? He could be more than the captain of one ship. He could be the Sultan of all Malaya. It would be easy to overthrow the British rule. In time, he might even replace Mohammed and Shiva in the prayers of the people! He shouted to his men, displaying the stones and they responded with cries of loyalty and support. They would follow him to the death! Sahar drank in the sight of the Dragon...power and wealth. He felt the opals' lure and began descending the long staircase leading to the courtyard.

* * *

Mei Ling was breathing fast and shallow as the rigid stalks of new bamboo began breaking her skin and steadily, a fraction of an inch at a time, working their way through the underlying tissue to the vital arteries and muscle. Indy was in no better shape. He had tried arching his body off the plants, but was unable to hold the position for very long. Everytime he came back down, he swore the bamboo had grown higher in that time.

"Indiana," she gasped, with ragged pain in her voice. "I do not want to die. Not like this."

"Neither do I, sweetheart. It's not my time yet." He heard her whimper. Straining and grunting against the ropes on his wrist, he stretched until he had his fingertips under hers. "Hold my hand, Mei Ling." What good it was going to do, he didn't know, but touch was one of the greatest of comforters and she hadn't felt--really felt--another touch in a long time. Her hand lay there with no response, but she didn't pull away either. "Do it!" he commanded. The fingers suddenly clung to his, her nails digging into his palm. She began crying. And the bamboo grew...quietly...insidiously.

* * *

Now in the temple's courtyard, Sahar was supremely confident as he approached the fantastic carving. Dreams and fantasies of limitless wealth and power were spinning through his influenced mind. The dragon called to him, it beckoned him. When he was within a few feet of the creature's head, a sudden hush came over the jungle with the breeze disappearing. A sudden hush came over the crew as well. Normally not a superstitious lot, they milled around, their expressions fearful as they became unnerved by the unexplainable. The unearthly stillness was something that could not be handled with the swipe of a kris blade. A few started backing away from the statue even as Sahar stepped closer.

* * *

Sweat was pouring off Indiana. No matter how he shifted his weight, he was unable to keep one part of his body off the ground without pressing on another for support. Still the bamboo grew. *A hell of a way to die,* he thought. This was not going to be pleasant. An abrupt rustling in the underbrush made him jump, grimacing when the shoots scraped against already raw, bleeding tissue. The bushes rustled again. Oh, great...now they were probably going to be a midnight snack for some jungle predator and there they were, impaled on bamboo shoots like cheese squares on toothpicks. Why hadn't he ever listened to his mother when she tried to warn him about things like this?

"Indy?" whispered a familiar voice from the leaves.

"Wu Han?!" squeaked the incredulous professor. "Quick, get these ropes off! Mei Ling first; I'm okay." Indy didn't know where he had come from, but he was going to treat that Chinese to the best dinner in Singapore!

Using his own kris knife, Wu Han made quick work of the restraints. As soon as he was free, Indy went right to Mei Ling, helping her to her feet. Holding her face in his hands, he asked, "Are you all right?" His eyes flickered over the several blood-stained areas on her tunic as well as on his own shirt. Trembling, she barely nodded, unable to protest when he folded her against him for a tight, brief moment.

"How did you know where to find us?" asked Indy while reluctantly letting Mei Ling go.

Wu Han grinned as he handed the whip and the gun back to the archeologist. "Small help have big ears."

Jones wound the braided leather into a coil as his hand closed into a satisfied fist around the familiar texture. The gun he hefted, checking it for ammunition, then placed it back in his holster. Things were definitely looking better. Only one thing was missing.

Mei Ling, too, was recovering quickly and already plotting her revenge, but she would thank her rescuer first. Her expression of gratitude changed quickly to one of suspicion as she stared at Wu Han, trying to remember where she had seen him before. Wu Han was trying to keep his head down in an unsuccessful attempt not to be recognized. She said something in street Chinese; he hotly replied, and she countered just as vehemently.

"Hey!?" said Indy, stepping between them like a referee. "What is this?"

Mei Ling backed away from both men, looking betrayed and angry. She directed her scorn at Indy. "Are you with the police as well?" she accused.

"What do you mean 'as well'?"

Wu Han, at this point, looked anything but inscrutable.

"He works for the Colonial police, Doctor Jones!" she told him. "He's an informer, a snitch!" Her tone was most uncomplimentary.

"Not snitch!" said the guide with genuine hurt. "Wu Han is like spy!" She then called him something much worse than a snitch or a spy.

"Pipe down, you two!" ordered Indy. "Listen!" He held up a finger for attention.

"Not hear anything," stated the guide.

"Exactly!" The jungle was indeed quiet; even the insects seemed to be silent. The air was still with not one leaf moving. "Something is happening. C'mon, we're going back."

Wu Han choked. "Place is chocking full of pirates! Why?!"

Indiana started walking back towards the temple complex. "To get my hat back, for one thing."

* * *

It was only a short distance back to the complex and with Indiana in the impatient lead, they soon reached the beginnings of the temple ruins. He held up a halting hand, then brought his finger to his lips, shushing the still bickering pair behind him. Jones was wary, expecting trouble, positive their approach had been detected. The stillness of the jungle seemed to accentuate and amplify every noise and to the scientist's ears, they had sounded like a herd of lame water buffalo moving through. He motioned for them to wait, then weaved and darted across an open expanse of weeds and crumbling stone, heading for the relative safety of a tiled archway. Flattening himself against the wall, he held his breath for a tense second, but there was no unfriendly greeting. He reappeared, waving his companions forward. Wu Han arrived first, giving Indiana the opportunity to comment on Mei Ling's accusations.

"Police informer, huh?" There was a little bit of anger in the question, a little disappointment and a lot of sarcasm.

The guide shrugged, looking and feeling guilty, but not sorry. "This one backed into corner. Do as Inspector ask or go to prison till time to join ancestors. Not like corners or prison."

Indy softened. "Or tigers." It was impossible really, for him to be mad. After all, Wu Han had just saved them from becoming jungle hors d'oeuvres. He thought back to the start of the trip, putting together a fairly accurate idea of the sequence of events that had led to Carveth's abrupt switch in guides. "Withrop's idea?" he correctly asked.

Wu Han nodded. "He think you have connection with Dragon Lady."

A soft chuckle came from the archeologist. "I suppose he's half right... but not the connection I'd *like* to have."

The lady in discussion chose that moment to breathlessly duck into the concealing archway. She frowned, not understanding Indiana's inappropriate grin, unaware that her appearance had coincided with a rather explicit thought on his part.

Indy started to take the lead again into the buildings, but Mei Ling unexpectedly slipped ahead of him. He grabbed her arm, cupping his hand firmly under her elbow. "Hold it. What do you think you're doing?"

She glanced down at his hand with almost the same expression she had used in the Raffles, but Jones was not about to be intimidated. The expression was transferred to his face where for a silent few seconds, they stared at each other, mentally battling for the position of leader through strength of will. Mei Ling had to battle harder for his was an aura of power that threatened to overwhelm hers. Wu Han wisely kept mum. He would rather have waited behind anyway. "I know the way, Doctor Jones," she finally stated. "You do not. It is as simple as that." But it was not that simple. A burning desire for revenge fueled her actions. She had vowed that Sahar would die by her hand. To accomplish this, it would be necessary for her to find the pirate leader first.

Back to square one, thought Doctor Jones as he took wry note of the returned formality. Seeing the wisdom behind the reasoning, but unaware of the real motive, he gave in. "After you," he mockingly bowed, then admonished, "Just be careful!"

Walking single file, they made their way through passageways lit with a combination of torches, oil lamps and lanterns; whatever had been available. The resulting fire shadows led to the eeriness they felt as they encountered no one; the only sounds being the flickering, hissing of the lamps and the crunch of dirt and rubble beneath their feet.

Half of Indiana longed to stop and examine the tiled, painted walls, envisioning glorious scenes of court life under the centuries of grime. The other half was watching every corner, every doorway, just waiting for the inevitable confrontation that did not materialize. Where in Tanis was everybody?

Recognizing a familiar stretch of corridor, Indy stopped, but gestured for Wu Han to continue. "Go, go. Stay with her," he instructed. Backtracking a few steps down an adjoining hallway, he swung into the doorway of what had been Mei Ling's room where he snatched back his hat from the eternally ready fertility statue. "Thanks, friend," he said. His fingers ran along the brim as he adjusted the fedora back into place. Picking up his pace, he caught up to his comrades as Wu Han disappeared through a narrow passage.

The passage led to an open balcony overlooking the courtyard with a stairway leading down to the circular enclosure. Wu Han was already bent down behind the carved, openwork stone parapet when Indy emerged, but Mei Ling was nowhere to be seen. His concern was temporarily shunted aside by the scene before him. With an equal mix of professional fascination and stifled horror, he watched as Sahar inserted the legendary opals into the eye sockets of the dragon statue.

"Uh, oh," he murmured. Then realizing his exposed position, he hastily joined Wu Han. "Where's Mei Ling?" he urgently whispered.

In answer, his finger bobbing repeatedly, the guide silently pointed down the stairs. There at the bottom was Madam Chang, crouched down behind the railing, peering around the last pillar, watching Sahar.

The pirate leader had stepped back from the carving, waiting...but nothing was happening. No hidden chamber opening to spill out treasure beyond imagining, no secrets of the universe revealed to his mind and his mind alone. He backed up some more, confused, worried and angry.

Indy pursed his lips in aggravation. "She's going to blow this whole thing!" He wavered between taking off after her or waiting for the results of Sahar's handiwork. She seemed safe enough for the moment; all attention was on that carving. The next few seconds dragged by into years and Indy grew restive. "According to the tapestry," he whispered, "all hell is supposed to break loose. The dragon was the guardian of the temple. Giving it sight was a final defense against invaders, used only when everything else had failed."

The men in the courtyard also grew restive...and quarrelsome; mumbling and grumbling amongst themselves. Where was this promised power and wealth? The Malayan became fearful inside, not understanding his crew's change in attitude. Deprived of the gems' influence, he no longer generated the charismatic effect and his crew found his leadership questionable. The bolder of the pirates began making demands; a few suggested going back to the boat and leaving the accursed ruins. But the opals' power was still strong on the man himself. "Stop!" his voice rang. "I still lead! I still command! None has given challenge!"

Then someone laughed. High, clear, feminine. It was Mei Ling, standing up, allowing herself to be seen. "I challenge!"

Indiana slapped a hand over his face. "Oh, Christ!"

Unbelieving at first, Sahar just stared, then with a fury immeasurable, he transferred all his anger and frustration towards Mei Ling. "Take her!" he ordered. Still half-conditioned to blind obedience, the pirates seized her from both sides.

"I'm going to kill her," Indy mumbled, half to himself, "...if he doesn't first." Regardless that she had gotten herself into this mess, Dragon Lady was obviously going to need help to get out. He tapped Wu Han on the shoulder, indicating that the guide was to follow him down the stairs, but half-way down, he realized that Wu Han wasn't following. Keeping low, Jones turned to find out what could be the problem, then froze when he heard heavy breathing behind him.

That unfriendly grunting was all too familiar and all too close and getting closer. With survival instincts honed by years of experience, Indy leapt over the stair railing, falling about ten feet to the courtyard below where he rolled to break his impact. On the stairs, Haio shook a mammoth fist as he saw his quarry land safely. His quivering bulk pounded back down the steps, bent on destroying this Occidental gnat once and for all.

Maybe Indiana landed safely, but he was far from safe as the pirates immediately surrounded him. He shot Mei Ling a scathing glare when they pulled him over to stand by her side. "Nice going," he criticized. "You've got them right where you want them."

Ignoring his sarcasm, she struggled against her captors, tossing her hair back with a haughty superior attitude. "I challenge Sahar," she spoke to the men, "prophet of false promises. Dare he stand against me or am I not old or feeble enough?"

"Certainly crazy enough," Indy mumbled.

With dissension already in the ranks, the pirates nodded, unanimously agreeing that Dragon Lady should have her chance. Even among the Strait pirates, there were codes of behavior and rules. Solitary leadership was a recognized necessity to maintain order, discipline and a unified effort. Sahar realized the futility of argument, psyching himself instead for the undoubtably quick and satisfying end to Madam Mei Ling Chang. He drew out his kris knife, letting the light from the ring of torches reflect off the highly polished steel as he held it horizontally over his head. His hands gripped the point and the hilt as he placed his feet in a wide balancing stance. "I accept!"

The pirates let her go, then thinned out, unconsciously following the circular perimeter of the courtyard. Confidently, the challenger walked forward. But she had been too fast, too hasty, had not thought out her plan in advance, too intent on revenge and realizing too late that she had no weapon with which to defend herself. She was the challenger and would be given no assistance. Frantically, suddenly terror-stricken, she looked around the courtyard for something...anything that could be used.

Victory assured, Sahar grinned maliciously before her. "So it is to be that I will personally end your life, after all." He advanced slowly, savoring the moment. Mei Ling unconsciously backed up, only half-breathing with the realization that her time to die had come, with the realization that it would not be an honorable death, that she would die in defeat.

"Mei Ling!" rang a voice from the balcony. She whirled to see Wu Han tossing his own dagger. It went spinning through the air, as accurate as a throwing star, flashing across the expanse of the courtyard. With desperation as her driving force, with help from the gods she had abandoned, she reached out and caught it, then spun to face her enemy. The Malayan pulled up short as she brandished the blade.

"It is you who will die," she said.

"Get him!" snarled Sahar, pointing towards the balcony.

Then the ground trembled. Ever so slightly, barely perceptible, yet a definite tremor, almost like a low purr from Mother Earth. No one moved, no one breathed...until the second tremor. This one was stronger than the first and it proved to be the last straw for the pirate crew. With nerves and latent superstitions already stretched to the breaking point, they panicked. Forgetting Wu Han, forgetting Indiana, forgetting Sahar and Mei Ling, they bolted and ran for the safety of the ship.

"Cowards! Fools!" the captain shouted, still sounding in control, but a bit of panic had touched him, too.

"I see fear," mocked Mei Ling, but her bravado was forced also. It had been many years since she had practiced her defensive arts, since she had cause to make use of them. She felt awkward and unsure at first, but then the adrenalin poured into her system. It was exhilarating, exciting and the enjoyment began to show on her face. Death was no longer something to be feared. If she died, it would be transcendental with considerable karma.

"Of a one-eyed woman?" he taunted back. "You see contempt!" Taking the initiative, he lunged forward, slashing for her face, but she was like a cobra, weaving from side to side with swift darting retreats. Sweat, other than could be attributed to the jungle heat, began to form on his brow. He had thought her soft and pampered, never dreaming she would be capable of such actions. He backed off, looking for weakness in her moves.

Seeing an opening, he again thrust the knife forward, but she sideslipped, bringing her own weapon up towards his stomach. The Malayan arched back, inhaling deeply, causing the knife to miss a fatal stroke. The razor-sharp tip cut through subcutaneous tissue, leaving a vertical incision from umbilicus to breastbone, a superficial injury only. Nevertheless, she had drawn first blood and the act glowed in triumphant elation on her face. Sahar didn't care for the act at all. He became a rabid animal as he stared down at the bleeding wound, a bestial, predatory need for her death affecting his judgement. Abandoning his cautious moves, he caught her off guard by hooking a foot behind her knee and forcing her small form to the ground. She gasped as he plunged his blade downward. Moving her head to the side just in time, the knife imbedded itself into the dirt next to her ear.

The earth again rocked beneath their feet, yet still no more than a sigh as quakes were measured. Up on the balcony, Wu Han thought it might be a better idea to be on level ground. On his way down the stairs, he glanced over the cliff face and the dragon. *Something* was happening. The gemstone eyes had begun to glow. They became fiery, incandescent. They swirled, they pulsated...they blinked! So did Wu Han--several times, not sure he saw what he thought he had seen. Regardless, now was not the time to question his own eyesight. He practically flew down the stairway, looking for Doctor Jones.

The archeologist had his hands full with Lei Haio attempting to turn him into chop suey. The Chinaman did not scare easily and had stayed when all the others had run. He was presently tying Indy's whip into a half-dozen knots. With a nasty Oriental chuckle, he threw the tangled ball back at the professor. Indy held it up, staring speechless at the now totally useless weapon.

Wu Han swung around the stairs at this point, and without taking his eyes off the statue, tugged on Indiana's sleeve. Jones batted him away, too worried about the angry mountain in front of him. The dragon blinked again with the olivine strip widening to a full iris. This time the guide was sure and he tugged with a vengeance on the leather jacket, muttering every Chinese/Dutch/Malayan incantation he could think of. Unable to ignore him, Indiana turned to glare at the insistent guide. "What?!" he said exasperated.

"Dragon eyes blink!" squeaked Wu Han.

"Don't be ridiculous," Indy snapped, "statues don't blink."

"Tell statue that!"

It took a second for Indy to realize that Wu Han was serious, a second for the information to register, for Indy to comprehend the incredible implications of Wu Han's observation. Those few seconds of inactivity and the instinctive, instantaneous turning of Indy's head to check out the dragon were time enough for Lei Haio. Distracted, Jones didn't see the Chinese behemoth making his move until it was too late. Haio slugged him. The scientist went down, flat out on the ground with the proverbial circle of stars rotating above his face. Only in Jones'case, they were little petroglyphs. The pirate grabbed him by the collar, half picked him up and proceeded to deliver a series of repeated blows. Wu Han joined the fight by jumping on Haio's back and wrapping a small arm around the guard's throat in a futile effort to strangle the man. It was like a flea trying to put a half-Nelson on an elephant.

Jones shook his head, trying to clear it, despite the pounding he was taking. He brought his hand up, jabbing hard and fast at Lei's eyes with his index and middle finger. It was a dirty, nasty, in-fighting little trick; one of Indiana's favorites and it worked. The guard howled in pain, covering his eyes with both hands and dropping the archeologist with a thud. Scrambling to his feet, Jones grabbed the long hank of bound hair on his opponent and pulled, swinging Lei towards a crumbling, circular stone depression in the ground. The momentum sent the Chinaman tripping and crashing into the remains of the temple carp pond. Indy dusted off his hands in satisfication when Haio didn't try to get up.

The other struggle was also near to a finish. Sahar still had Mei Ling pinned to the ground where they were locked in a hand-and-wrist impasse. Repeatedly, he slammed her hand, the one holding the knife, against the ground, brutally bashing it on a piece of sharp tile until her hand went limp and the weapon slipped from her fingers. With one free hand, she strained with all her strength, drawing on last reserves to hold his knife-wielding hand away, but with each second, the pirate captain brought death closer.

Then all hell broke loose.

A tremendous, tympanum-shattering sound split the air. It was a cross between a banshee shriek and a roar; something alive, yet not possible. A sound not heard on the face of the earth in hundreds of centuries. The sound of a living, breathing dragon.

"Holy shit," said Indiana in something like reverence and something like good old-fashioned fear. Wu Han's mouth just opened and closed with not a sound coming out.

The dragon shrieked again, seeming to proclaim its return and rebirth. It rose to its full majestic height, awesome and terrifying beyond belief, yet dazzlingly beautiful. It gave off a radiant heat that distorted the air, giving it an ethereal, shimmering effect. Its tail, as long as the entire animal, lashed back and forth, as supple as a cat's, while its head swiveled around as it examined its surroundings. The eyes blazed, then focused on the two closest moving objects: Sahar and Mei Ling.

The Malayan had gotten to his feet, staring in triumph at the powerful beast. *This* was the power and it belonged to him! The wealth of the world would be his with this creature to obey him. "I am your master!" he shouted, raising his arms. "I have brought you to life! Destroy my enemies!"

Behind the raving captain, Mei Ling began to get up. "Stay down!" commanded Indiana from across the court. "Flatten out! *Now!*" Even as she instinctively obeyed that panicked order, the dragon exhaled. There was no actual flame from the throat, just a wavering effect in the air to indicate that any 'breath' was being emitted. Supremely confident, Sahar stood directly in its path. Supremely confident, he burst into white-hot flames, screaming in horrible, unimaginable agony as he became a pillar of fire. With her face to the ground and her hands over her head, Mei Ling hugged the earth, feeling the searing heat like a blast furnace all around her.

The all-too-real mythical creature turned away, leaving a grotesque, deformed corpse. What was left resembled nothing so much as a blackened, smoldering, spent matchstick. Claiming its kill, the overgrown reptile roared into the sky, then began advancing out of the cave.

The ground shook for a third time, violently this time and a running crack appeared in the ground, splitting the earth. As the quake continued, it became progressively wider and deeper until it grew into a full-fledged chasm. In the temple, archways collapsed and pillars toppled with the buildings starting to cave in as a result. The dragon exhaled again, setting the surrounding brush on fire with a whoosh of flames, lighting the destruction in a Dantesque, flickering red glow.

Things were going from bad to worse and Indy decided the time had come to follow the crew's example and get the hell out of there. He had to get to Mei Ling first, though. She was still in the middle of the courtyard, not daring to move, 'playing dead' for all intents and purposes. He gulped. Going after her would mean coming awfully close to big, bad and incendiary. *Where,* he mentally complained, *is Saint George when you really need him?* Calling Mei Ling's name, he charged across the courtyard.

Her head came up cautiously at first, but then she sat bolt upright and shouted, "Indy! Behind you!"

No, it wasn't the dragon, but something almost as nasty--Lei Haio. Doctor Jones hadn't reckoned with Haio's hard head. With all attention on the dragon, the guard had recovered, crawling unseen out of the pond. Enraged, he had picked up a long length of wood and went after Indiana like a Neanderthal with a club. Jones whirled, but the dragon suddenly swung its powerful, muscular tail and took them both out. It slammed into both men, knocking them off their feet and sweeping them into the deep fissure. Haio went straight to the bottom, but Indiana grabbed for the wood piece that had fortuitously fallen across the rift. He dangled with both hands for a few breathless, heart-stopping seconds, then began moving across the beam.

In the courtyard, the dragon was finding itself hampered and hemmed-in by the cliff and the buildings. Unable to move very far in any one direction, it was becoming angry and frustrated. Like an annoyed cat, the tail whipped back and forth, narrowly missing Wu Han as he pulled Mei Ling out from under the beast's path.

In the fissure, Haio was trying to scramble up the sides, but they were too steep and the ground too crumbly. He slipped back with each attempt, making no headway while pleading with Indiana for help and mercy.

"Fat chance," grinned Jones as he inched along. Then the beam cracked. Then it cracked some more. Then it bowed in the middle. The grin vanished, replaced by a wide-eyed panic, then relief as Wu Han and Mei Ling appeared on the edge, reaching out helping hands.

But behind them, the dragon also appeared. It loomed over the fissure, turning its huge head this way and that, the jeweled eyes fixing on the trio. It was so close they could feel the heat emanating from its iridescent scales, could smell the sulphur wafting from the nostrils. So close that the opals swirled; brilliant and scintillating, they mesmerized like a hypnotist's swinging focus point. The archeologist could well understand the gems' lure over the centuries. Close to exhaustion, Indy was losing himself in their enchanted depths, losing his grip on reality and losing his grip on the beam. It might have been minutes or hours as far as he was concerned, but it was actually only seconds before Wu Han's frantic voice filtered through the stones' spell. "The eyes, Indy," he instructed, "shoot them! Lo Feng say to destroy the eyes!"

The professor shook his head again, clearing away the opal cobwebs completely. Hanging on with one arm thrown over the beam, he drew out the revolver with the other. Finally, it was there when he needed it! But instead of shooting, he hesitated. The eyes were pieces of the past; to be saved, to be protected.

"Indy, now!!" pleaded Mei Ling.

He couldn't...he couldn't... The dragon began to open its mouth...he could! His finger convulsively pulled the trigger; once--twice in rapid succession, shattering the legendary opals forever.

Then all hell really did break loose. The death screams from the animal were nearly drowned out by the roar from the ground beneath them. It felt as if the entire Malayan peninsula had moved. Gas and super-heated steam began to erupt from multiple fissures that formed in quick succession while the first one began closing. Haio gibbered away at the bottom, scrabbling in desperation as the sides began to close in while Indy moved hand over hand on the beam like an orangutan. The sagging beam snapped just before he reached the edge, but his companions' arms shot out, grabbing him before he could fall. The fissure groaned and scraped and slammed shut only a second after his feet were clear.

But they were not through yet. Though sightless again, the dragon was still very much a real threat. It shrieked and cried, clawing at its face, screaming in torment. In its agony, it had set fire to the temple complex and flames flared all around them. The buildings began to collapse, crashing in clouds of plaster, stone and fiery support structure. Underneath, the ground shuddered, heaved and rippled as if if were a piece of cloth, then the whole area began to sink. Now was definitely the time to leave.

Mei Ling screamed as a burning timber came toppling towards her. Indiana grabbed her around the waist, pulled her away, then dragged her along as he began running with Wu Han right beside. "Go! Go! Move!" Indy urged.

Earth and stone and temple were sinking, collapsing, disappearing into a spewing column of hissing gas and steam. The last dying screams from the last dragon on earth could still be heard above the thundering geological cataclysm.

The three ran for the jungle, barely making it to safe, stable ground before the entire temple disappeared, crashing and falling into a huge new sinkhole on the Malayan Coast. Sea water from underground connecting caves began to pour into the hole, causing monstrous clouds of steam to billow out of the newly formed crater.

Doctor Indiana Jones, Professor of Archeology, stared out at the total destruction; an acute feeling of loss and pain gnawing at his insides. "Never again," he murmured. Never again would he deliberately destroy an artifact. If the situation ever arose again, he would save the past.

* * *

It was a cool, dry, early next morning with Indiana standing outside the shallow cave they had used as a night's shelter. The sun had yet to rise high enough to increase the temperature or humidity. He sniffed the air, feeling the rush that always came with the dawn. A new day to discover something old.

He still felt the loss of the Dragon Eyes but not as keenly, having rationalized his actions during the night, making a pact and a peace within himself. Hearing Mei Ling stirring, he turned around to look at her small form curled

up on the floor of the cave and felt another rush as he smiled in fond recollection of the night. Exhausted, shaking and cold, she hadn't protested when he wrapped his jacket around her, then wrapped *himself* around her to conserve heat while they tried to sleep. Conserving heat hadn't been his only reason.

Inside, Mei Ling woke, blinking towards the light as a shadow fell across her. She drew in a sharp, deep breath, for Indiana stood silhouetted in the cave opening. Back-lit by the sun, he was a dark, glowing figure that tugged at her will. Reentering the cave, he knelt down on one knee next to her as she propped herself up on an elbow. The long black hair hung in soft disarray around her face.

"Hi," he said softly. "Sleeping on the ground obviously agrees with you, but somehow I knew you'd be beautiful in the morning." He held her attention, not bothering to disguise the desire in his eyes. She looked back, finding his greenish-gold irises more compelling than any opals, and remembering how it felt to be warmed by the heat from his body.

"Indy!" cried Wu Han as he appeared in the cave entrance. "Look! I find durians for breakfast again!"

Jones wrinkled his face--as much for the interruption as for the smell. "Can't you ever find anything else?"

The guide looked hurt. "Is good omen! Saw signs of safari trail, too. We'll have easy trip back to Singapore."

While Mei Ling wound her hair into one long braid to get it out of the way, Indy and Wu Han split open the durians with the resulting breakfast turning into an impromptu party as they were all soon a sticky, custardy mess. Wu Han and Dragon Lady had made their own peace between them, and they joked and talked as if they had been friends for years. Half-way through the meal, though, Wu Han began noticing the byplay between Indy and Dragon Lady. They were sneaking quick little glances at each other, but trying not to get caught doing it. The Chinaman raised his eyebrows, rather tickled at the implications and the possibilities.

Finished, Mei Ling was licking her fingers in a slow, leisurely manner that was driving Indiana straight up the cave wall. It was going to be a *long* trip back to Singapore. Her hands still sticky, she looked for something to wipe them on, figuring that she would probably have to settle for a handful of wet leaves.

"There is stream of water a little ways," Wu Han said, pointing left, out of the cave.

She got up, giving Indy a quizzical look when he followed suit. "I'm going with you," he explained.

"Why?" she bristled, clearly suspicious.

His temper flared. "Oh, give it a rest, sweetheart!" After all that, she still didn't trust him. "I don't have any ulterior motives!" Exasperated and tired of tippy-toeing around her psyche, he practically stomped out of the cave. "In case you hadn't noticed, my hands are sticky, too!"

With Indiana several lengths in the lead, they walked the distance to the stream in sullen and sulking silence, then picked different areas of the stream bank to wash off the residue of the fruit. It was rather a pretty spot, almost idyllic with several flocks of crimson-patterned butterflies flitting around in bright flashes of color. The air was fragrant with odors of frangipani and orchids and as Indy glanced over at her, he felt his anger abate as the surroundings worked a magic. It was pretty and idyllic and dangerous as they subconsciously let down not only the physical guards, but their emotional ones as well.

Mei Ling withdrew from the water's edge first, then casually began exploring the area. Indy followed, not wanting to lose sight of her...for more reasons than one. The horrors of the last day seemed like a bad dream as they appreciated the scenery until they were rudely reminded by a stand of bamboo. Both of them gave a shudder and a shared grimace at the sight of the beige stalks that seemed to form a ring around a grassy clearing.

Suddenly, Indiana halted, clamped a hand over her mouth, then clamped the other on her shoulder, pushing her down hard towards the ground. He crouched down next to her, placing a finger across his lips before he took his hand away from her face. Years of ingrained behavior did not disappear overnight so, despite the warning, she whispered loudly. "How dare..." He impatiently shushed her, motioning again, this time with a threatening sneer, for her to be quiet. A moment later and she understood why.

A rustle made her see what Indiana's sharp eye had already noticed; a large moving form passing behind the bamboo thicket. Orange and black stripes could be seen between the tubular growths. Indy heard Mei Ling's sharp intake of breath as a beautiful tigress pattered into the thicket clearing. The cat's tawny body stretched out in lithe, graceful ease as she lay down, then began licking her paws. Paws that were the size of dinner plates.

After a few minutes, it became obvious that the cat was planning on an extended grooming session as she began working her tongue over the rest of her fur. Indiana was at a loss to what to do. They didn't dare move. Not that he wanted to, though. Despite a beginning cramp in his leg, he rather liked the position. Crouched behind Mei Ling, his head was over her left shoulder, his mouth scant inches from her ear. She lay poised between his arms, a thin space separating her back from Indy's chest. He couldn't help but breath in her scent, musky and intoxicating.

A feline roar broke the relative soft silence of the morning jungle, but that roar hadn't come from the tigress. The cat picked her head up at the sound, her ears at attention, then answered in kind. The first roar was heard again, deeper than the female's, decidedly masculine. Mei Ling tensed, ready to run, but Indy again put his hand firmly on her shoulder, holding her in place, then moved in closer to her. The move totally eliminated the thin space.

"There's two of them," he whispered huskily, awed at the possibility, though the tremor in his voice had nothing to do with two live tigers only a short distance away. Then the second cat made his appearance. This time Indiana gasped. It was a magnificent male, perhaps six hundred pounds of pure power and supple grace. It circled the female who went down in a submissive crouch. The tiger stopped to rub a huge head against hers, nudging along her chin line. Her ears relaxed, even falling to the side of her head.

Mei Ling's eye was wide with both fear and excitement. This was a rare and honored thing to see, yet she was also aware and distracted by the man behind her. Acutely distracted by the smell of leather against her, by the sensation of his warm breath upon her cheek as he spoke in low tones, "They're going to mate, Mei Ling."

She bit her lip as, sure enough, the tiger again circled, rearing up behind the tigress to couple with her. Mei Ling felt her own responses rising as the male's rear haunch muscles contracted in powerful rippling spasms...to say nothing of what Indy was experiencing! The tiger's head moved forward to grasp the female's neck scruff between surprisingly gentle jaws. Her eyes were closed, her paws splayed out on the ground, and from her throat came a deep, thrumming purr.

Mei Ling could scarcely breathe, could barely think, only conscious of the tigers and Indiana Jones. Just as she thought she would scream from the escalating tension, the tiger abruptly released his mate and after licking his paws a few times in apparent self-satisfaction, ambled back into the jungle.

So much for post-coital tenderness, thought Indiana. He had a wry idea that he and the tiger could probably exchange a few pointers in technique. The tigress, however, seemed more than satisfied. She rolled over and over in the soft loam of the jungle floor, even resting on her back with her paws relaxed on her chest, behaving for all the world like a house tabby. But then there was a sudden snap in the jungle. She instantly sprang to all fours, becoming the total predator again. With two long leaps, she was gone, just a blur of vivid orange, leaving the area somehow darker for her absence.

Leaving it decidedly safer, that much was sure. But although the tigers were gone, neither Mei Ling nor Indy let out a sigh of relief or made any motion to move. The emotions that had been stirred within them as a result of the tigers' purely biological passions were flaring into passions of their own. Jones had been aware of her sensuality, been attracted to her from the very start; the idea of making love to her never far from his immediate thoughts since that first fateful meeting. Mei Ling, though, was terrified of her feelings. A raging war of conflicts fought within her as she was torn between years of deliberate isolation and wave after wave of desire for this man.

Indy chose that moment to fractionally shift his weight and she immediately took advantage, standing up as quickly as her tight, cramped muscles would allow. He also stood up, slower, with more precision. She wiped damp hands down her pants, avoiding his eyes. "I...I guess we should hurry back." She started walking away. "Wu Han will begin to worry." If she could just take a few steps, just put a few feet of insulating air between herself and his aura of power, she would be all right.

But Indiana wouldn't let the moment nor the opportunity slip away. "Mei Ling!" he said hoarsely, his voice almost a plea while his hand shot out to wrap around her wrist. It wasn't a restraining hand. She could easily have slipped out of his grasp. Yet his touch held her there as if it had been a vise. She couldn't--didn't resist as he slowly but steadily pulled her back. Still unable to look at him, she felt the full impact of that aura when he placed his hands, strong, gentle hands on her cheeks and tilted her face up. Eyes so green, so deep burned into hers. "Let it happen," he urged. When he brought his lips down to meet hers, she trembled, never dreaming the sensation would be so exquisite. The pleasure was contradictory to everything she had expected. What *had* she been missing?!

Indiana slowly drew back, searching her face, waiting for a sign of fear or resistance, but he saw and felt only willing surrender. A sharp pang of guilt hit him, a stab of conscience. It was wrong and he knew it. It would change her life forever, not necessarily for the better. But Indy the man had never been one to listen to his head if his heart or his libido were also involved. An aching, rushing, out-of-control desire threatened to overwhelm him. He gave in to it, the experience to come worth whatever price would have to be paid--by both of them. His mouth covered hers again, his tongue urging her lips open--touching, discovering, tasting--but not taking. Not just yet. She was still the artifact, would still shatter if handled too roughly, still needing support around the more fragile areas. Such support could not be hurried.

Mei Ling was soaring with the anticipation of these new and wonderful feelings. She held her breath as his fingers unfastened the toggle closing on her tunic, then moved inside to caress her breasts with firm, expert strokes. Indy kissed her again, hard and demanding this time, molding his body against hers. Hesitantly, then desperately, she put her arms around him, clutching at his back with a passion she could not yet comprehend. But she was learning, she was learning.

They slowly slid to the jungle floor, lying down in the depression left by the tigers. The ground was still warm from the cats' bodies. Jones undressed her without resistance and while removing his own clothes, simply appreciated the sight of her golden body stretched out before him.

"I repeat, you're beautiful," he stated, moving towards her and wanting to take her so badly he had to close his eyes and mentally slow down. Not yet...not yet. Wanting to know what pleased her, he ran full palms along the curves and hollows of her skin, leaving a trail of liquid fire behind his fingers as her body arched in response to the tactile seduction. He put those hands back on her face, his thumbs under her chin, tilting her head back to expose her throat to his now intense and hungry mouth. He had been right. She did have a beautiful throat. Placing rapid, small kisses along her jawline, he moved past her ear, then brushed her eyelid. Suddenly, abruptly--maddeningly--he stopped.

Mei Ling was panting at this point, her responses building and climbing to an explosive level. Confused, she looked at him, wondering what was wrong, wanting him to continue! He stared down at her with a feral intensity that was frightening--not quite human. Then his hand came up to grasp the cord holding the eye patch in place. Her reaction was immediate. Panicked, she tried to pull away from his firmly entwined fingers. She pleaded with him, mouthing a repeated, silent, "No."

Indiana slipped in the last reinforcement to his artifact support. "Trust me, Mei Ling," he whispered softly. "Trust me with your fears." His voice was hypnotic, coming from a dark place somewhere deep within the archeologist. "Trust me with your soul."

All resistance gone, she let go of his hand, allowing him to remove the concealing black oval. The area underneath was a jagged slash of misshapen tissue, but not as bad as Indy had imagined. He brought his lips down to tenderly kiss the scarred flesh. With this most intimate of touches, he felt her relax, as she became emotionally as well as physically naked. *Now* was the time. Now he could take as well as give.

She eagerly, almost frantically, moved to receive him, biting into his shoulder at the one sharp moment of wonderful pain, after which he murmured soft, soothing sounds, just holding her for a few apologetic seconds. It was Mei Ling, though, who urged him to finish. Indy didn't need much urging. He was a raging fire, a flame that consumed her as her body hurdled towards a shattering climax. Then his own fire flared into an incandescent inferno while he held her like a man possessed.

After a few gasping, shuddering moments, Indy picked himself up, leaning on his elbows. His hand brushed a few twigs and leaves from her hair as he looked down at her. His mouth formed a wry, tiger-smug smile. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked.

In answer, her hands stroked his back, feeling the relaxed, but still well-defined muscles under her fingers. "Again," she whispered.

"Again?" Indy looked a little bemused.

"Again," she stated, much more assertively while shifting her weight so that they rolled with her gaining the dominant position.

If that's what the lady wants... Even if he wasn't quite up to a repeat at the moment, he soon would be, especially if Mei Ling continued doing what she was now doing. She was learning very fast and Indy had a flashing thought that she might turn out to be more than he bargained for. Either way, it was going to be an unforgettable trip back to Singapore.

* * *

For Wu Han, it turned out to be a very lonely trip back to Singapore as his two traveling companions 'disappeared' into the jungle at every opportunity.

Once back in the seaport city, they all opted for a day or two of rest, and tried to maintain a low profile. Indiana and Mei Ling checked into a single room at the Raffles, while Wu Han delayed his report to the police for as long as possible. It was inevitable, though, that word would somehow reach the Inspector's office. Hotel staff everywhere were notorious for keyhole peeking and Wu Han was not the only informer in Singapore.

Purely by accident, Indiana ran into the two constables sent to bring him back to the police station. He was making travel arrangements in the lobby of the hotel when they flanked him on both sides. He looked quickly left, then right, realizing that he had no choice but to agree when they politely ordered him to accompany them. His mind and his heart were racing, though, thinking that he had to get word to Mei Ling somehow.

In the Inspector's office, Indiana once again paced the room, rather angrily this time. "If you don't believe my story, there's nothing more I can tell you and no reason for me to be here. Sahar is dead, trust me on that, but I don't know where your Dragon Lady is!"

Sir Withrop stood behind his desk, trying to look authoritative. "Your story is preposterous, Doctor Jones! As is the version told by Wu Han. I will grant you that we have received reports of quakes near the coast, but you can't possibly expect me to believe that live dragons had anything to do with it!"

Indy gave a disgusted shrug. "Singular, Inspector. One dragon--and no," he sighed wearily, "I guess I can't. Forgive me, but I forgot to take pictures."

Before Withrop could take offense at the sarcastic comment, his door opened, admitting a police officer. "Yes, constable?" Sir Percy prompted, looking smug and eager.

The man came to attention. "There was no sign of the woman in Doctor Jones' room, Inspector. Nor anywhere in the hotel. The staff members questioned deny seeing her."

The smug, eager look vanished. "Damnation," muttered Withrop between clenched teeth.

It was Indiana's turn to look smug as he rested a palm on the desk. "Searching my room while I'm down here...not very cricket." He kept the elation and sigh of relief inside. Instead, he pretended to look offended. "I told you, I don't know where she is." At least now he was telling the truth. For the first time in hours, he relaxed, assuming that Wu Han had warned her in time.

But when he met the guide outside, Wu Han told him that she had already been gone when he got to the room. "Here. She leave you note." He withdrew a slightly crumpled envelope from under his shirt.

Muttering under his breath about useless bureaucrats, Jones tore open the envelope, pulling out a folded piece of hotel stationery. The note was hastily written. It read:

> *Our time seems to have come to its end. I fear it is no longer safe for me to remain with you, or you with me, so regrettably, I must leave in this cold fashion.*
>
> *We will meet again, Indiana Jones. This I promise, though Gods and governments will work to prevent it. My fears and my soul go with you. If you have need of me, I will be here.*
>
> *Mei Ling*

Indiana pressed his lips together, then sighed. "That's that," but he refolded the note, carefully tucking it into a pants pocket. He turned to Wu Han. "What happened between you and Withrop?" he asked.

"Inspector not believe Wu Han's story. Say he will not believe anything I tell him anymore."

"I'm sorry."

"No difference, Indy. Dragon Lady know I work for Inspector. This means many others did also. Very soon, I would not learn anything."

The professor placed his hands on his friend's shoulders, taking a serious attitude. "But are you going to be okay? I'm leaving tomorrow."

There was a con artist twinkle in the almond eyes as he nodded and Jones realized that Wu Han would have no problems. Then the twinkle dulled. "This one is most unhappy that you are leaving."

The archeologist thought of Mei Ling...and Nurhachi. "I'll be coming back. And I'll be needing a good friend when I do. I think I know where I'll find one."

* * *

Silent Sol(o)iloquy

You tell me you love me
That's the worst thing to do
'Cause how do you know
If I can love you?

Weren't you the one who said
All along from the start
That I was a guy
Who didn't have a heart?

Or if I had a heart, after all
Then money was all I could love --
"I'm not in this for you, Princess"
The reward was all I thought of.

"You think a princess and a guy like me...?"
I once said in jest to the kid
He thought I meant it but I didn't --
Or maybe I really did?

We've been through a lot since then, Princess
And there's so much you helped me see
I was totally blind to my feelings
In love? No way -- not me.

But you chopped through my outer shell
And made me see the light
I was just so afraid to trust again --
That's why I put up a fight.

And you ain't been so open with me
I guess you were kinda scared, too
Never wanting to care 'bout someone
Afraid you'll be hurt if you do.

Looks like our fears are comin' true now
Since I'm probably about to die
Oh, gods, Leia, why is this happening?
I don't want to see you cry.

Now that it's too late, I realize one thing
I never was in this for the dough
Guess that's why when you tell me you love me
I hear myself whisper, "I know..."

jill THOMAS

EDITORS' NOTE: This story originally appeared in NEWS OF THE REBELLION #10 and is being reprinted with permission of Paula Truelove, Editor.

curtain call

ILLUSTRATED BY
YVONNE ZAN

L.A. ADOLF

We've a first class assortment of magic;
And for raising a posthumous shade
With effects that are comic or tragic
There's no cheaper house in the trade . . .

Gilbert and Sullivan, THE SORCERER

The old man added the final ingredient to the pot of shang stew without leaving his comfortable position on the far side of his desert dwelling. As if by its own volition, the cooking vessel settled itself into the processor and the cycle began automatically. His attention elsewhere, the old man seemed not to notice.

"Again?" The old man appeared to the casual observer--had there been one--to be carrying on an animated conversation with himself. Yet, if one listened carefully, they could also hear the faint tones of the voice of another--carried as though on a gentle breeze from far away.

"Yes, failed again have they," the voice proclaimed. "And so simple a test."

"It seemed reasonable. Solo *is* here, in the complex of the one known as the Hutt." The old man sighed. "First the ship intercept, now this..." He shook his head.

"And prepares Vader does, while distracted their attention is," the spectral voice said in exasperation.

"Sometime too clever are we..." The old man grimaced as he realized he was assuming the singular phrasing of his teacher.

"Yes," the voice said softly, "and sometimes mistaken are we."

The old man raised his head, as though to look into the eyes of his unseen companion. "I know what you're about to say. It wasn't I who considered that mix of bloodlines desirable...'the strength and power of Vader' indeed. Luke *is* our last hope and we've got to make the best of what we have!"

"Hmpf...told you and told you have I...there *is* another!"

The old man tossed a skeptical look into thin air. After a moment, he settled back, closed his eyes and drew his brows together in concentration. After several minutes, he opened his eyes and leaned forward once again. "And *I* am Emperor Palpatine..." he declared disgustedly. "There is no one else."

"Never do you listen? Nothing have I said of another Skywalker...nothing! Alternative there is...another *way*," the Jedi Master fairly shouted. For the briefest of moments, Obi-Wan Kenobi could discern the form of his master hovering in mid-air, so great had been the energy he'd put into emphasizing his point.

"Careful," Kenobi soothed. "You aren't supposed to project, remember? Another *way*? Why didn't you say so before?"

A heavy sigh, full of the weight of eight hundred years of teaching recalcitrant pupils filled the dwelling. "All was not in readiness--necessary it was," the Jedi Master said in his best long-suffering tone. "And say so before *did* I. *Listen* why do you not?"

"I'm listening now, Master," Kenobi said distinctly. "Tell me your other...way."

"Waiting have I been to hear that," Yoda replied. "Like it you will not."

"Go on."

"Give up you must what have you here. End this charade must you."

"Ummm..." Kenobi cocked his head. "But..."

The sound of a shrill chime interrupted him. Across the room his pot of shang stew bubbled frenetically, lapping at the lip of the cooking vessel. "Wait...something's burning! I'll be back..." Kenobi rose and hurried to the processor.

Yoda sighed. "Heard that before where have I?" Light years away he settled back next to the fire in his hut and waited for his former pupil to tend to the concerns of his corporeal existence. He hoped that somehow, somewhere, Vader might also be encountering mundane problems of his own.

* * *

The uniform, he noted with satisfaction, retained a perfect fit despite twenty years of personal vicissitudes and its own incarceration in his well-travelled trunk. Standing back, he admired the cut of the Old Republic general officer attire and reflected that neither Imperials nor Rebels had come up with anything smarter. He tugged at the stubborn crease on the sleeve of the jacket, wishing he could spare the time to have the uniform properly cleaned and prepared. Yoda, however, seemed to consider time of the essence and there was no war council anymore to reprimand him for a slovenly appearance.

It was good to be back in action once again. Life in the Dune Sea had nearly spoiled him with its timelessness. His pan-dimensional travels--to coerce Luke Skywalker into going to Dagobah, and observing his training once there--had exercised his mind, furthered Yoda's plans, but had only served to profoundly rest his body. It had been an essential respite for a corporeal frame strained and abused by his split second teleportation from the Death Star and the stroke of Darth Vader's lightsabre to Tatooine. Yet, it was good now to be once again on the move, physically and spiritually. He might not even bend distances and time as he made his way to Mos Eisley to allow himself the exercise.

Moving out of the cool dark hut into the blinding brilliance of the Jundland Wastes, Kenobi suppressed a feeling of incompleteness as his hand went automatically to the belt from which a lightsabre had swung long ago. He forced his hand to drop once again to his side. He well knew the time for mechanical weapons--even the elegant lightsabre--had long since passed. His next meeting with Darth Vader would be far different from his last.

* * *

He had reached the outskirts of Mos Eisley--a solitary figure in an out-of-place uniform, seemingly unmindful of the blistering heat of the twin suns--when a thought occurred to him. Smiling, he diverted his course slightly, heading for the rougher side of town.

It was not something he was required to do, although there were reasons to recommend it. Han Solo was not a disposable element in the scheme of things, and, after all, the others had had *their* chance--several in fact.

"If you want something done right," the old Jedi Knight muttered, pulling at the crease in his uniform sleeve, "you've got to do it yourself."

Reaching the complex that housed the operations of Jabba the Hutt, Kenobi realized, after a moment's consideration, that the old Jedi axiom about the Force's effect on the weak minded need fear no reversal within these walls. Smiling, he mounted the steps.

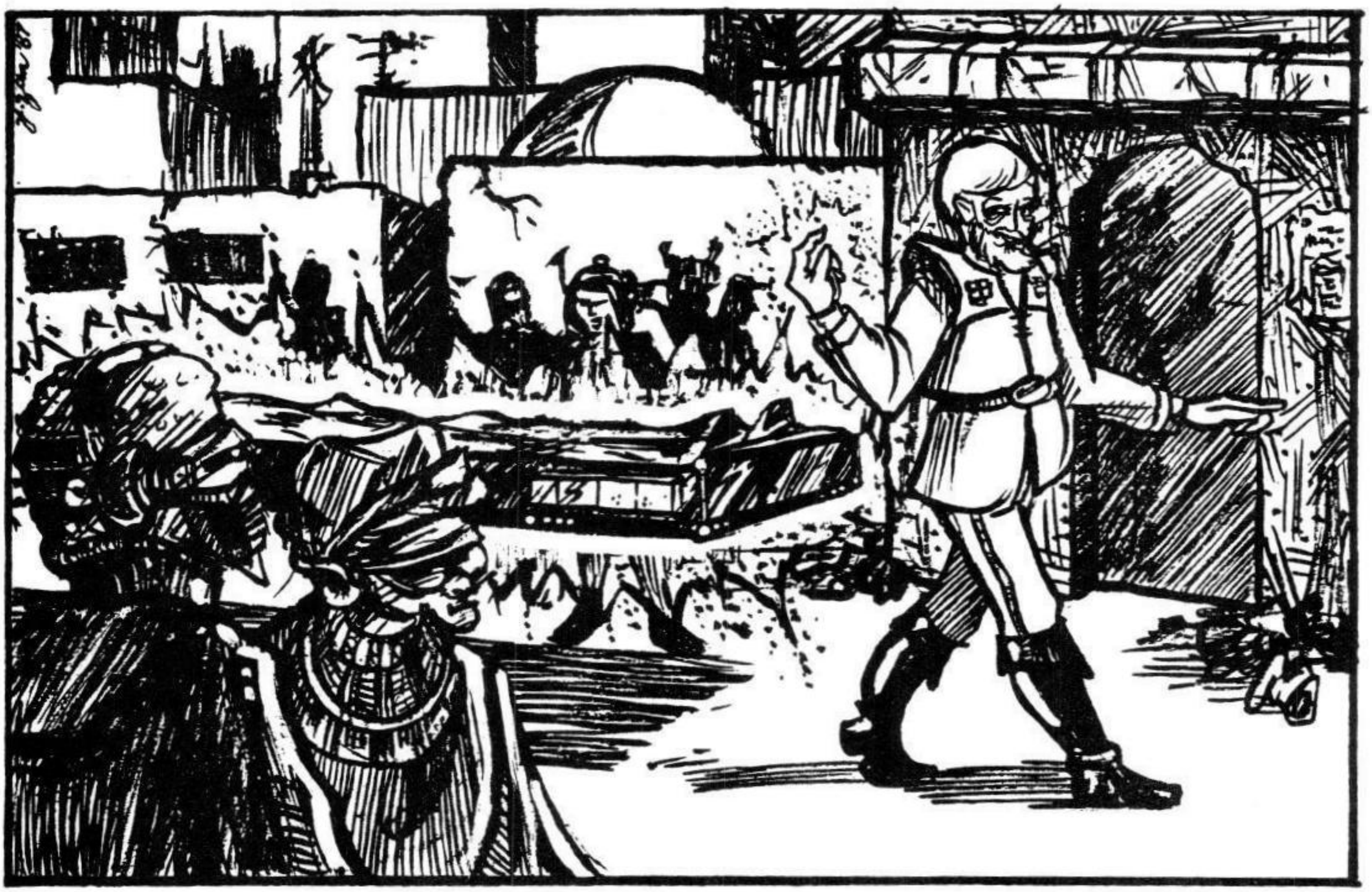
* * *

Sometime later, Kenobi exited Jabba's complex confidently. Casting a casual glance up and down the Mos Eisley side street, he stepped away from the building and took in deep lungfuls of warm air. He released them energetically.

His objective had been accomplished with relative ease. Thanks, he now realized, to the regimen of lessons Yoda had put him through during his just ended Dune Sea exile. He wryly remembered the schedule of Force mastery exercises--on a level undreamt of by Luke Skywalker--and most especially the consequences when he had failed to apply himself completely. Young Luke might someday like to know that even Obi-Wan Kenobi was not immune to stern lectures from the Jedi Master. Chuckling at the thought, the old man turned his attention to the situation at hand.

Kenobi turned and crooked a finger beckoningly. Momentarily, a shape moved out of the doorway and fell in behind him. Gesturing lazily, Kenobi began walking down the street. "Now to one of your old haunts, Han!" Obi-Wan said cheerfully, not sparing a backward glance.

He received no answer, but then, he had expected none. Totally unmindful of the picture he presented, Obi-Wan Kenobi walked unhurriedly through the streets of Mos Eisley, followed--without benefit of antigravs--by the carbonite encased form of Han Solo.



* * *

Kenobi stood in the entryway of the spaceport cantina, noting how little the establishment and its occupants had changed since his last visit. His eyes quickly scanned the crowd for signs of stormtroopers and Imperial snoops. Perceiving none for the moment, the old man moved into the cantina proper.

"Hey, you!" a gruff voice boomed warningly.

Kenobi paused, eyes settling on the bartender. "Yes?"

"We don't serve his kind in here!" The bartender pointed in the direction of the carbonite slab, which hovered horizontally a few paces behind the Jedi.

"I beg your pardon?" Kenobi asked, genuinely puzzled. "What kind is that?" he asked politely.

"Don't get smart with me, old man. If it's got a metal skin, it ain't welcome here."

Kenobi considered a minute, weighing his alternatives. Finally, he sighed, and turned to face the carbonite casing. "Sorry, son," he said and waggled a finger. The carbonite slab moved back until it rested vertically against a wall inside the entrance to the cantina. Kenobi turned to look at the bartender, who, satisfied, was in the middle of pouring a drink for a large insectoid.

Kenobi, satisfied to have the matter so easily taken care of, moved into the throng of patrons, searching for a likely point of contact. Finding one, he moved in to begin the next phase of his plan.

* * *

"I can offer you seventy-five thousand credits," Kenobi said softly, appraising the pilot who sat opposite him. He noted a flash of what almost seemed hunger in the other's eyes at the mention of the offer.

"Seventy-five thousand..." the pilot repeated, his mind working furiously. That would take care of his debt to the Hutt and leave more than enough to replace his ship with something newer, faster and fancier. The offer was like an answer to his prayers--but he mustn't seem too eager. "I don't know. Ships like mine just don't grow on trees, old man, and if they did, I'm on the wrong planet. Ya sure I just can't fly you somewhere? You gotta *have* a ship?"

"Quite sure. I consider the offer generous. If it doesn't please you, I can continue to look--elsewhere," Kenobi replied casually as he pulled--for the hundredth time today--at the recalcitrant crease on his uniform sleeve.

"Oh, no!" the pilot blurted in spite of himself. "I'll take it. You can have my ship, her cargo, even my copilot if you want. With that I can buy a dozen more and pay my debts to the Hutt."

"The ship will suffice. We shall conclude the deal on board then. Docking bay?"

"Oh, right. Ninety-four. Right next--"

"I am familiar with docking bay ninety-four," Kenobi interrupted. His adventure was beginning to take on a decided aspect of *deja vu*. Thoughtfully, he looked at the pilot. "Might I offer you a word of advice?" he said sincerely.

The pilot looked puzzled. "For that amount of money, you can offer me anything. What is it?"

"Pay your debts to Jabba the Hutt first, and endeavor never to become indebted to him again. Then worry about replacing your ship."

"What do you know about it?" the pilot asked, eyes narrowing.

"I had a friend once who allowed his debt to Jabba to remain unpaid."

"Yeah, and what happened to him?"

Kenobi smiled, an expression with more than a touch of irony to it. "You might say Jabba froze his assets. In more ways than one. Mark my words."

"Whatever you say, old man. Docking bay ninety-four in fifteen minutes?" The pilot rose, looking at Kenobi inquisitively.

The Jedi nodded, watching the pilot exit the cantina, stopping briefly beside the slab that imprisoned Han Solo, take a quick look back, and then proceed, shaking his head negatively.

"Can't say I didn't warn him," Kenobi muttered under his breath.

Obi-Wan stood and made his way slowly back to the entrance. The carbonite slab, which had been partially obstructed from his view moments before, had not been moved, but it was not altogether untouched.

"Just as well you can't see yourself, Captain Solo," Kenobi said softly, shaking his head. Gently he reached out to remove the helmet and jacket from where they hung on the outstretched, clawlike hands.

Wagging his finger again, Kenobi stepped out into the sunlight and began the familiar walk to docking bay ninety-four.

* * *

Kenobi sat in the cockpit of the small freighter, favoring the controls with a jaundiced eye. The Force, he had discovered, was no substitute for up-to-date piloting skills.

Suddenly, a thought struck him and he had his solution, one nearly as obvious as Yoda's other way. He wondered briefly if his time in the Jundland Wastes had baked his brain rather than sharpened it. He stood and walked into the cargo hold to face the carbonite slab that entombed Han Solo.

He hadn't planned to do this yet, however, twenty years of technological evolution had rendered the point moot. Approaching the sarcophagus, he placed a hand to the forehead of the bas-relief pilot. Closing his eyes, he wove the fabric of the Force around them.

Slowly, the feel of carbonite retreated beneath his touch and finally gave way completely to warm flesh. Obi-Wan Kenobi opened his eyes and looked into Han Solo's face. As he watched, the younger man's eyes opened and instantly registered profound shock.

"I must be dead..." came the taut observation.

"Come now," Kenobi soothed. "Do you feel dead?"

"How the hell would I know?" Solo's voice was little more than a croak, but it conveyed his irritation efficiently. "Do you?"

Before Kenobi could reply, Han Solo lurched suddenly. The old Jedi reached out to steady him. At the physical contact, Han Solo recoiled and found the strength and coordination to move back a step. "You're *alive*!!" Han exclaimed.

"Unquestionably."

"B-but...I...we...you..." Han fumbled, trying to concentrate, "Vader..." Unable to find the words, Han made an illustrative swing with his arm, as though to indicate the blow of a lightsabre.

"It's a long story, Captain Solo. Unfortunately, we haven't the time for it now. Imperial troops have been alerted to my presence and time is of the essence. I require your piloting skills."

"But, wait...how did I...what about Jabba?"

"Again, a long story. If you please, Captain? The cockpit is this way..."

* * *

Han Solo was hunched over the control board in the cockpit, a look of concentration on his features. They had just blasted out of Mos Eisley and would be clearing Tatooine's atmosphere momentarily. Han grinned and reached over to clap Kenobi--seated in the copilot position--on the shoulder familiarly. "Just like old times, eh, old man?" he said before his eyes automatically returned to study the controls. "Uh, oh." He looked at the sensor screen intently. "You weren't kidding about Imperials, were you?"

"No," Obi-Wan concentrated a moment, "A cruiser and several TIEs, correct?"

"Yeah. I sure hope I can outrun 'em. Depends on how good this ship of yours is."

"I assure you, the ship is perfectly sound. Top operating condition."

"Uh-huh," Han replied, unconvinced.

Further conversation was interrupted by a volley of Imperial fire. Han threw extra power to the rear deflectors and put the ship through several evasive maneuvers. Kenobi watched him carefully, noting a certain surprise in his companion at the ship's performance.

"Handles well, doesn't she?" the Jedi prompted.

Han shot him a withering look. "So far, so good. But I can't keep this up all day. Coordinates?"

"Oh, yes. Point-oh-six-eight-two-five-L-U-H."

Han punched in the coordinates automatically, initiating the cycle for lightspeed calculations. He shot a quick look at Kenobi. "*Provided* the navicomputer in this crate works, I'll have the calculations for the jump to lightspeed in a minute."

"Forty-three and one-tenth seconds," Kenobi corrected. Han's eyes narrowed and he snorted derisively, launching the ship into a series of maneuvers as the Imperials fired off another volley.

Han had just pulled the ship out of a roll when the navicomputer tell-tale chimed--exactly forty-three and one-tenth seconds after he'd initiated the cycle. He fought to keep his eyebrows from crawling up his forehead. Instead, he announced melodramatically: "Here goes nothing!"

Han activated the hyperspace controls and the ship effortlessly leapt forward into cosmic never-never land. The jump completed, Han Solo grinned in spite of himself and gave a short, appreciative laugh. "Beautiful! This thing's better than the *Falcon*!" he said in a paroxysm of magnanimity.

"At the price I paid for it," Kenobi remarked wryly, "it should be."

Remembering loyalty to his own ship came before appreciation of the finer points of others, Han's expression grew indignant. "Now watch what you say about *my* ship! She got you out of Mos Eisley the last time, didn't she?"

Kenobi nodded benignly, choosing not to mention the fact that Solo had initiated the subject to begin with.

Triumphant with his apparent victory, Han settled back completely in his seat, visually scanning the various readouts. After a moment of silence, he turned once again to Kenobi. "Those coordinates. What are they? Where are we going?" he asked.

"Why, the Rebel base, of course," Kenobi replied, unfastening his restraints and walking out of the cockpit.

"What?" Han released his own restraints and followed. "How would you know where they are? You've been dead, remember?"

Kenobi turned to face Han and put a friendly arm around the young man's shoulders as Han moved up beside him. "A long story, Han. Another long story. However, since we have a little time, I might as well start from the beginning..."

* * *

"Identify yourselves. You have entered restricted space. Further advance will be considered a hostile action unless the proper password is offered," an officious voice crackled over the speaker of the ship's com-console.

"You'd never know these guys are on *our* side!" Han muttered disgustedly. He activated the board. "This is Captain Han Solo and General Obi-Wan Kenobi on board the *Whill's Triumph*, requesting permission to land."

"Very funny, *Whill's Triumph*," the voice lost some of its proprietry to take on a sarcastic tone. "Next time pick on people who are still alive. Password or we'll blow you out of the sky."

Han flicked off the console, muttering deprecations. "*Wonderful*! Come out of hyperspace into Rebel space and this is the welcome! And now I'm dead, too! I think the Imperials would be happier to see us!" he exclaimed. Turning to Kenobi, he continued, "Okay, wizard, you knew the coordinates, how about the password?"

For the first time since he'd released Han from carbon freeze, Kenobi looked genuinely perplexed. "Oh, dear," the old Jedi said, "I don't know."

"You don't *know*?" Han exclaimed, "Our 'friends' are ready to blow us out of space and you don't know? Where's the damn Force when you need it? I can't believe this!"

Kenobi could only look discomfited. Disgusted in the extreme, Han turned back to the com-console. "Okay. How about 'Massassi Messenger'?" Han offered over the console.

"Nice try, *Whill's Triumph*. You've got twenty seconds before we open fire. Counting..."

Han frantically searched his memory for every Rebel password he'd ever heard. "Uh...'Hoth Nomad'...?"

"Fifteen seconds. Try again...fourteen..."

Han shot a quick glance at Kenobi, who sat leaning back in his seat, eyes closed and brows drawn together. "You taking a nap or are you gonna conjure the password" Solo hissed. He flicked on the com-console. "Let's see... 'Remember Alderaan'...?"

"Ten seconds. Warmer, but not hot," came the icy reply.

Han thought furiously. "Look, this is Han Solo, really. Put me through to Princess Leia or General Rieekan--they'll confirm--"

"Four seconds."

"'Tatooinian Sunsets'?" Han offered.

"Two seconds..." was his only reply.

"Kenobi!!" Han yelled. "Do something!!"

"Fire!" the voice commanded.

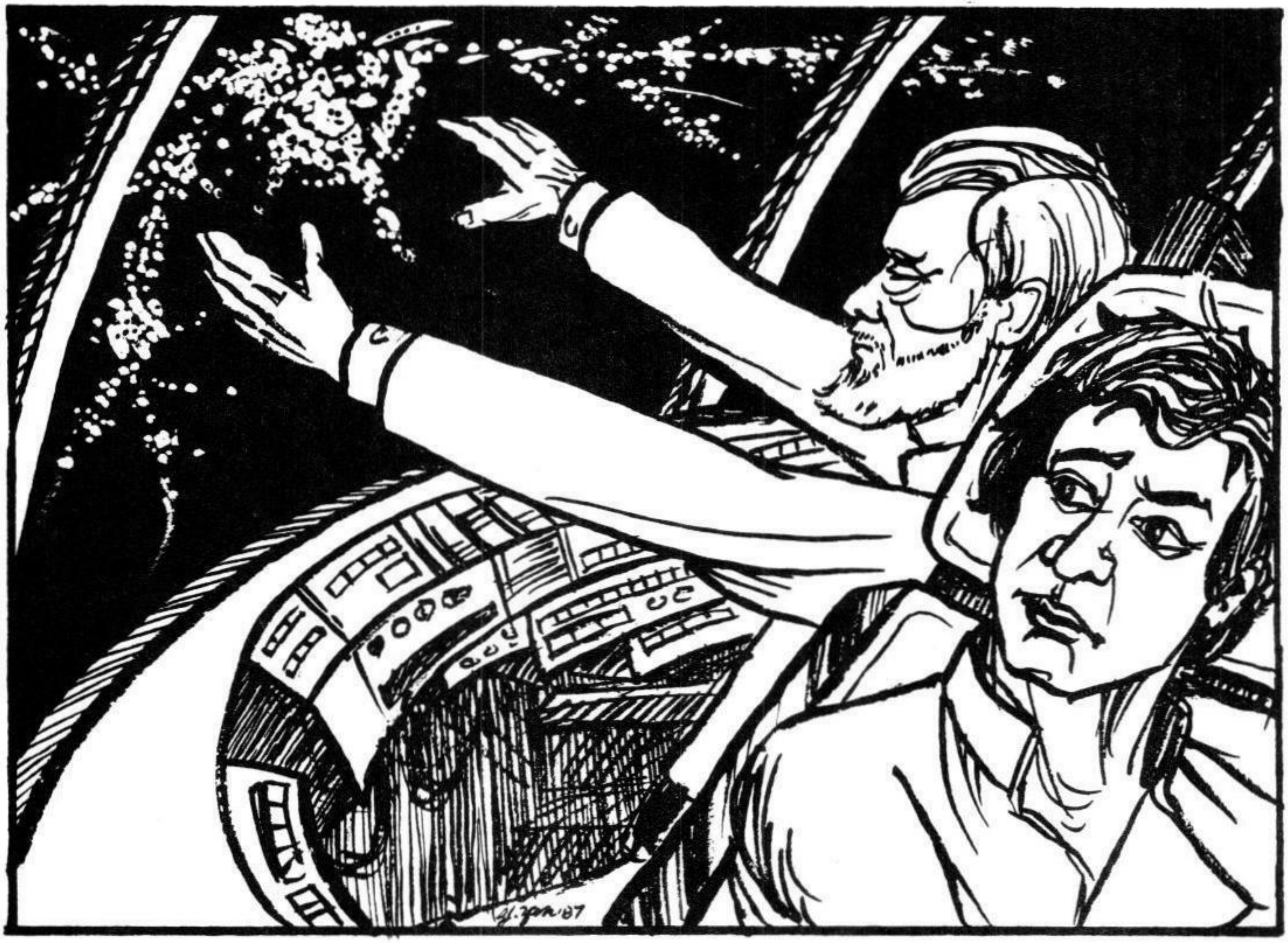
Rousing himself, Obi-Wan opened his eyes and tugged at the accursed crease on his uniform sleeve. "Oh, how tiresome!" he exclaimed. Calmly, he held out his arms and simultaneously an energy bolt loomed large through the viewports. Han Solo fought the urge to close his eyes and instead watched doom descend upon them. He braced himself for impact.

It never came.

Instead, the energy bolt--to his utter amazement--fragmented and began to do an elaborate ballet around the ship, dancing close but never quite touching.

The old Jedi beside him waved an arm nonchalantly and the fragments whizzed off into the depths of space. Volley after volley followed, each dispersed more amazingly than the last.

"One more time, Rebel base. This is *Whill's Triumph* requesting permission to land," Han repeated, hoping the old man's theatrics had had some effect on the Rebels.



"Repeat your names, please," the voice responded, far less belligerently than before.

"I'm Han Solo, Captain of the *Millennium Falcon*, which damn well better be berthed in your hangar, and with me is General Obi-Wan Kenobi, late of the Clone Wars and of the Order of the Jedi Knights."

"Jedi Knights! Why didn't you say that before?! That's the damned password! Permission granted!"

Han Solo shot a glance upward, a cry of mortal outrage rumbling in his throat. Controlling the urge to scream, he looked daggers at Kenobi.

With enviable calm, the old Jedi merely smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

* * *

The ship settled down gently, causing a ripple of excitement to run through the assembled crowd. The technician on guard duty had pronounced the new arrivals duly cleared and non-hostile, but had neglected to provide a clue to their identity--whether out of embarrassment, or merely an oversight, it would never be fully understood. Even so, long before the ship had entered the atmosphere, the crowd had begun to gather in the massive base hangar, anxious for a glimpse of the mysterious new arrivals.

The ship lowered its ramp and Han Solo, unsure of his reception, descended cautiously. Stepping out of the shadow of the ship, he faced the crowd calmly, relieved to see that no one was wielding blasters--yet.

Almost by accident his eyes fell upon a figure clad all in white, a breathtaking vision of loveliness--Princess Leia. Instinctively, Han took a step forward. To his horror, and just as she returned his startled gaze, Leia crumpled to the ground. Panicked, Han Solo covered the ground between them at a dead run. Throwing himself down beside her, he lifted one pale, limp arm and began chafing it.

"Aw, come on, Leia," Han pleaded, "you've never fainted on me before!" Han looked up into the eyes of a nearby Rebel. Desperately, he asked, "Anybody got a bucket of water?"

"A bucket...of...WATER!" Leia Organa was instantly awake, eyes blazing. Lifting herself on one elbow, she seemed ready to deliver either a stinging verbal attack, or an equally sharp physical blow. Suddenly, an unearthly howl shattered the moment and Han Solo was pulled up and away from her, clasped in strong furry arms. Leia scrambled to her feet in time to see Chewbacca tossing Han Solo into the air as though he were a newborn Wookiee cub.

"H-h-hey, Chewiiieee, put me down! You overgrown fleabag, put...me... down!"

"Whhhhhhhrrrrrrrooooooooowwwhhh Hnnnn!" came the exuberant response.

"Put me down, Chewie; you're gonna break something!" Han cried as he was thrown upward for the third time.

"Chewie, put him down!!" Leia yelled emphatically.

While all eyes were rivetted on the spectacular homecoming, the figure of Obi-Wan Kenobi moved casually down the ship's ramp and over to the crowd. As Han was enjoying his fourth toss upward, Kenobi moved alongside the fascinated form of General Rieekan. "Is it always like this, Rieekan?"

Rieekan spun around at the sound of a voice he'd not heard in nearly twenty years. His eyes were wide and his mouth hung open as his vision confirmed his auditory perception.

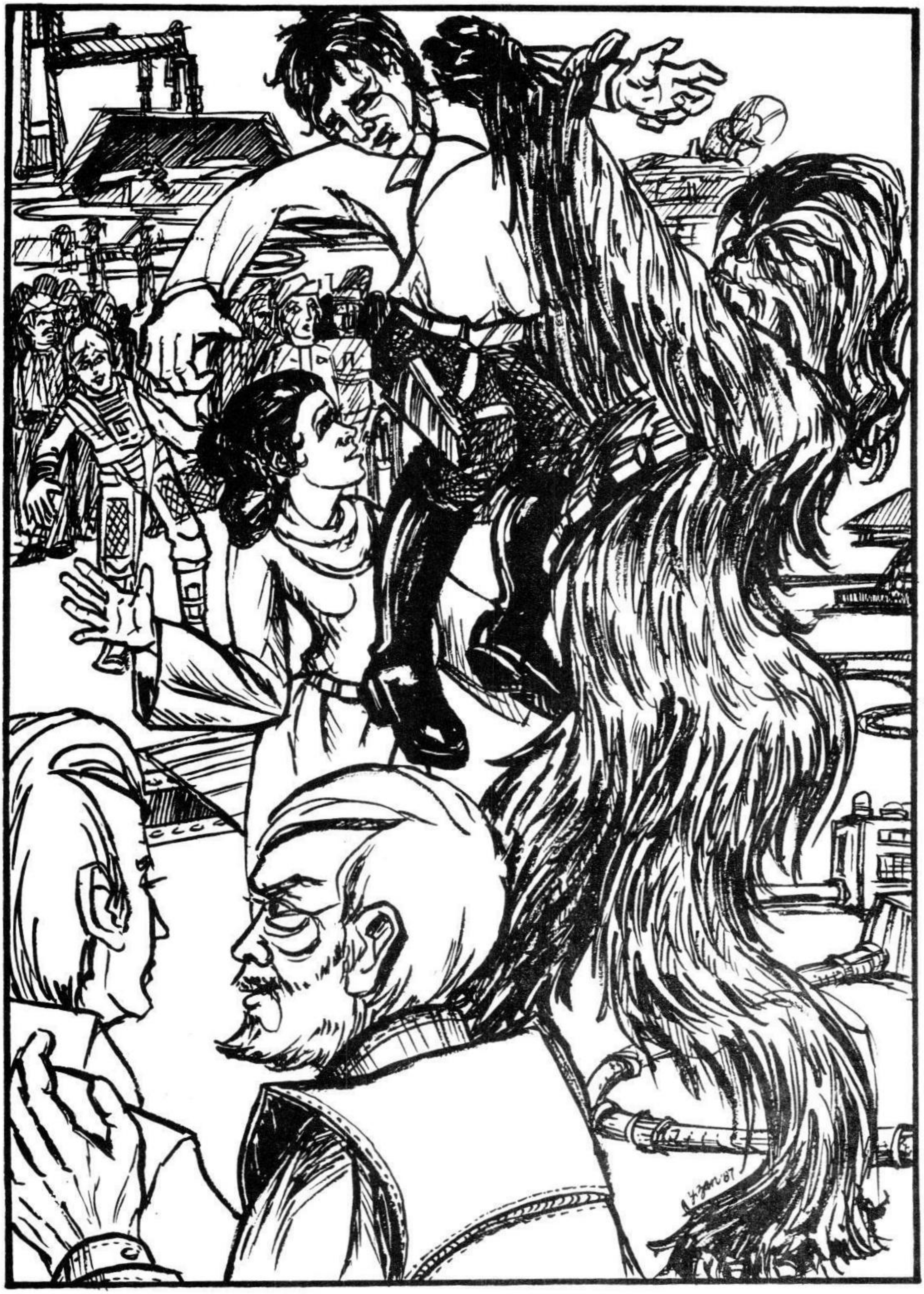
"No wonder the war's taking so long," Kenobi continued.

"It's *never* been like this!" Rieekan said, extending his hand in greeting, a movement cordially accepted by Kenobi.

"Hey," a voice from the back of the crowd called out, "What's all the excitement?" The crowd parted to allow Luke Skywalker to saunter forward. "I was fixing my X-wing and I--" the young commander began. He stopped abruptly, eyes rivetted on the figure of Obi-Wan Kenobi. "Ben, is that you?"

"My dear boy, who do you think it would be?" Kenobi replied kindly.

Luke closed the distance between them, a discomfitted look on his face. "But, Ben, right here in front of everyone? Can they all see you?"


Y.Zan '87

He reached out to touch one gold braided arm. On contact with the unexpectedly solid flesh, his face blanched and his blue eyes grew saucer wide. "You're ali--..." was all Luke was able to gasp. Then he opted for the least painful response: *he* fainted.

Kenobi sighed and looked at Rieekan, smoothing the eternal crease out of his uniform sleeve unconsciously. "An epidemic perhaps?" he commented.

Rieekan merely shrugged sheepishly.

A few feet away, the voice of Han Solo rose indignantly, "That's the thanks *I* get! Save his life twice and he doesn't even *see* me!"

Rieekan had grown thoughtful as he contemplated the limp form of Luke Skywalker. "Do you think you'd have the same effect on the enemy?" he asked Kenobi hopefully.

"I've got something better," the old Jedi confided, drawing Rieekan aside, away from the knot of people. "I've been working on this for a long time..." With a flourish of his hand and a concentrated look, Kenobi caused the air before them to coalesce into the spectral image of Bail Organa, Viceroy and first Chairman of the martyred Alderaan system.

A short distance away, clutching frantically at Han Solo's arms, Leia Organa shrieked and looked as though she might faint again. Supporting her, Han gestured at the image cavalierly. "Take it easy, Princess. It's just a monodimensional molecular replication," Han soothed gently.

Kenobi turned to face his erstwhile travelling companion, his concentration shattered by Han's unexpectedly accurate description. Behind him the ghostly image of Leia's father faded away as Han grinned.

From the floor came a low moan as Luke Skywalker stirred briefly in his insensibility, then lapsed again into utter stillness. Kenobi looked down and shook his head. "His family was always high strung..." he explained. While the assembled crowd watched in amazement, he wagged a finger and Luke Skywalker's prone form lifted off the hangar floor, hovering horizontally in front of the mysterious old gentleman.

"He'll be all right. But I'm afraid I must bring this very entertaining reunion to a close. General Rieekan, I have come to discuss an important matter with you and your council. I must insist we do so immediately."

Rieekan, forcing himself to look away from Luke's floating figure, seemed puzzled. "Important matter?" he repeated distractedly as Kenobi maneuvered Luke behind him.

Kenobi smiled beneficently, and gently guided Rieekan in the direction of the command center. Luke Skywalker floated a few paces behind; Leia, Han and Chewie fell in after, with the remainder of the spellbound Rebel personnel closing the gap behind.

"Yes, my boy. I think the end of the Rebellion qualifies as an Important Matter...don't you?"

* * *

Many light years away, the Jedi Master Yoda sat in the middle of his tiny earthen hut, rocking to and fro in quiet delight. His wizened features were the epitome of supreme self satisfaction.

"Told him I did!" the Jedi Master said smugly, tapping his Gimer stick on the ground triumphantly.

Soon it would all be over--that which he'd worked for tirelessly and long, thirty-two hours out of every twelve-hour Dagobahan day. For the first time in many years, he would be free of the concerns of maneuvering the Rebellion to a satisfactory conclusion.

The first thing he was going to do, he promised himself, was to take a long, long nap.

my dearest john

Remembering . . . Another life
another me
another you
That summer our souls found each other
And we were no longer alone

Danger, excitement, the heat of the summer,
And love . . .
But soon the fantasy became too real,
The excitement too dangerous
You had fallen too deep, I had been pushed too far
The wall held fast between our two worlds

Never again will I be that other me
Or you be that other you
But part of them will live forever
In our memories, in our souls
Dancing in the barn, making love in the grass
No one can ever take that from us

I found my other you
One cold, sleepless winter's night
And thoughts of what might have been kept me company
Thank you, John Book, for that special summer
I hope you've found everything you were seeking then
Life means nothing without dreams

christine haire

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I would like to thank the following people out of too many to include in full, for support, inspiration, nagging, and my shameless appropriation of everything from their stuff to their advice. At least two are long dead and may not care, but three exhausted cheers to the rest of you guys: Jean Stevenson, Pat Nussman, Jacqueline Taero, Martie Benedict-O'Brien, Sherry Magee, Paula Truelove, Jenny McAdams (for TYPING this honker!), Mr. Harrison Ford, Daved Belasco, and Owen Wister.

Events of this story are built around material that appears in FRISCO KID, the novelization of that film, and an early draft of the script. I have fudged a few realities such as a three-year leeway on the actual social and economic conditions in the California gold camps. I've done so with the same principles by which the film has Avrom DOCKING in a harbor of landlocked Philadelphia--and by which every 'B' Western was ever scripted--if it works, USE IT!

A TOMMY TALE

ILLUSTRATED BY
WANDA LYBARGER
&
MARTYNN

PART 1

WANDA LYBARGER

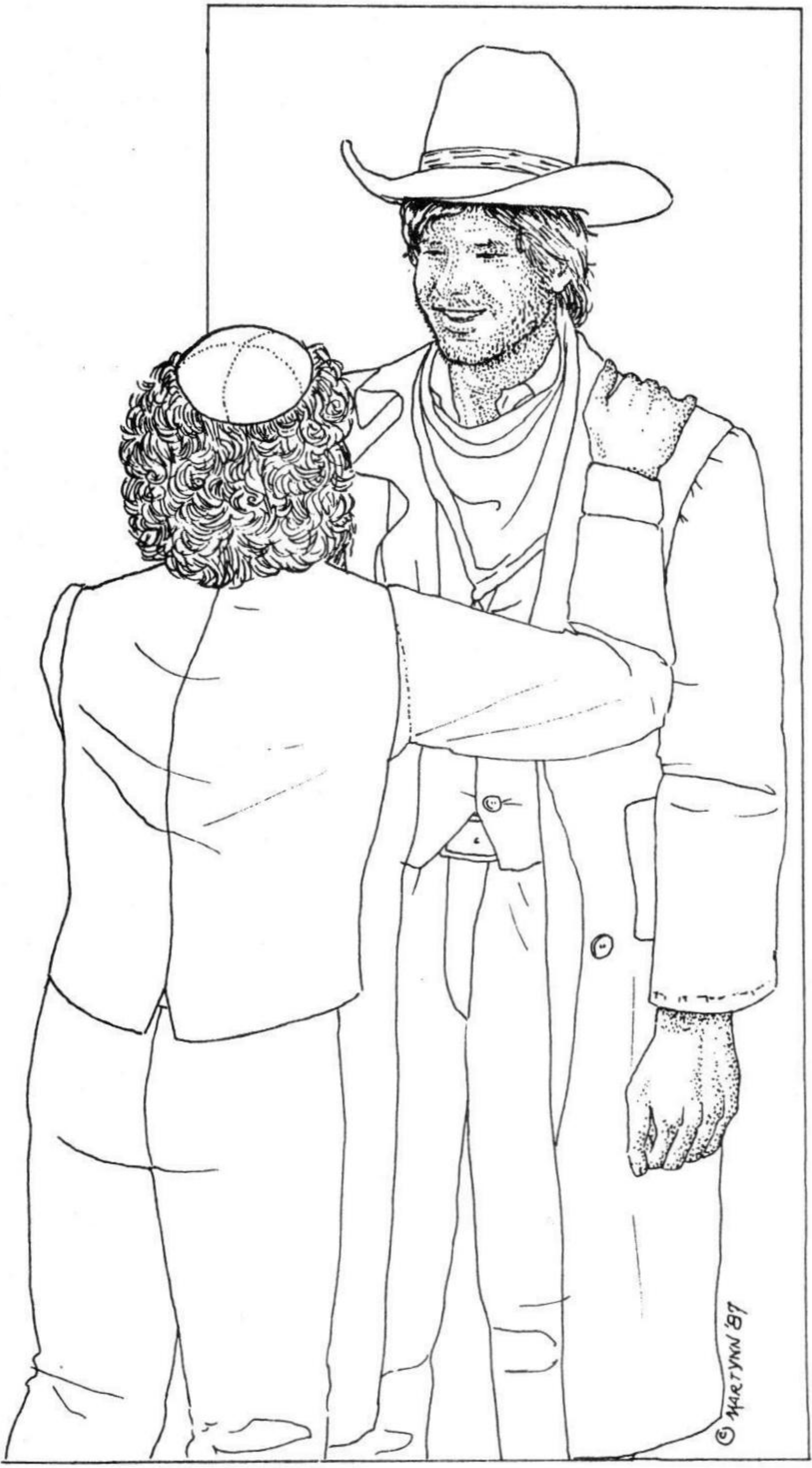
Avram put aside his notes for the next *shul* and massaged between his eyes with thumb and forefinger. As he adjusted his *yarmulke*, he could hear Rosalie moving around the kitchen and had been smelling the distracting aroma of fresh-ground coffee for ten minutes or more. The rattle of china was suggestive. Even in the midst of her Sabbath preparations, a tray would appear momentarily in the parlor. Could any rabbi, any man have a better wife? She even took Tommy in stride, and Avram knew that could stretch one's steps. Still...God willing, he would have opportunity to stretch again soon.

He pushed back from the dropleaf desk and stood in stiff increments. The mantel clock surprised him, mid-afternoon already. A brisk series of firm raps on the door turned him through the archway toward the narrow foyer.

"I will get it, my dear," he called back to the kitchen. When he opened the door, he was confronted with a tall man wreathed in alkalai dust and a smile. Avram's world suddenly expanded in delight. "Tommy!"

The rumpled traveler's smile widened into a white grin in answer to the rabbi's obvious pleasure. He pushed back the deep stetson with a thumb while his baritone was warm with a pronounced drawl. "Howdy, Cuz, I just got into Frisco and thought..." He got no farther as the slightly shorter man enveloped him in an uninhibited bear hug.

"Tommy, you are back safe from the gold fields! I was so worried when you left--and no word for three months!" Avram gave the prodigal's shoulders a


© MARTYNN '87

reproachful shake but never slowed his spate of excited monologue. "You couldn't send a message by one of the river boats once? You forgot us maybe, you find so much gold? Rosalie!" The last was a shout up the hallway. "Rosalie, look who has come home. Set another place, and we must make up the back bedroom.

The final proposal and Avram's diverted attention permitted Tommy to wedge a word into the exuberant welcome. "Hey, Cuz, now don't you and Rosalie fuss none. I can get a room at the El Dorado like when you got married. I just wanted to check on how you folks was doin' and see how much the lil' guy had grown."

Avram swiveled back to face his friend with more close attention. Tommy's demur had been more hesitant than just polite gesture. He saw now that there was an uncharacteristic reserve, almost of shyness, in Tommy's manner. Nonplussed, he placed one hand deliberately on Tommy's arm, his open face serious as he studied his visitor. "Tommy Lillard, you doubt your welcome? After all we have shared, all I owe..."

Tommy waved dismissal as he interrupted. "Cut that stuff out. You know it's the other way 'round."

Avram shook his head. "No, my friend. We both know I would not be here today..." He heard his wife approaching and his light blue eyes crinkled in renewed warmth, "...and I would not have my Rosalie."

Tommy also heard her and snatched off his stetson--anxiously, Avram thought, for a man singularly untrammeled by conventions. He marked that the smile Tommy directed over Avram's shoulder into the hall had diminished and gone soft with embarrassment.

"Rosalie knows this too, Tommy. Also, she knows how I have missed you--and worried when you left after the wedding. She was as glad as I to see you again and have you stay with us after Avigar was born." Avram was earnestly convincing as he heard Rosalie arrive behind his shoulder.

"Tommy! It is good to see you! You are in time for Sabbath dinner. There's plenty of time to draw you a good, hot bath while I put fresh linen on your bed." Her friendly tone belied the firmness of her pointedly critical survey of Lillard's dusty presence.

Tommy wavered, his genuine yearning obvious. A hot soak was a luxury the often trail-benighted drifter treasured. But he shook his head quickly. "Thanks, Rosalie, but I'd like to get this wagon and team converted into cash while there's still time to find a buyer today."

He yanked a thumb over his shoulder at a canvas-backed heavy wagon and hitch of six mules in the street in front of the house. Avram only then noticed Tommy's white-footed bay unsaddled and tethered to the rear of the wagon.

"I don't want to board and feed this lot if I can help it." The cowboy made a humorously rueful grimace in which Avram detected a hint of some darker emotion his friend had been at pains to mask. "They're all I got to show for three month's work. I sure don't wanta have to lay out cash on 'em besides."

The rabbi was instantly disquieted. "You were not successful, Tommy? Where...where did all this come from then?" *Please, Tommy, when you came back for the baby's birth, I hoped it meant the wildness had settled. Even when you* *left after only three months, I understood you needed to make money, but mining gold was honest work. Oh, please, my friend, I don't want to squeeze heart for you again...*

As if he knew the rabbi's fears, as indeed he had reason to guess, Tommy's smile grew wide again, tilting the deep-set eyes with teasing merriment. "Relax, Cuz," his drawl was expansive. "This here's a poker pot. Reg'lar five card stud, an' it was a new deck." He chuckled outright at Avram's abashed dip of the head. Then briskness tempered the light moment.

"Anyway, don't go to no fuss. I'll see how long it takes, an' if I run overdue, I'll put up at the El Dorado for the night. If I don't sell the team, I'll have to board 'em at the stable, 'round back of there anyhow." He started to tug his hat back on, half turning away even as he continued to speak. "But I'm right obliged for the welcome, and I'll be along if I can."

Rosalie seemed to feel Avram's dismayed regret and anxiety for she whisked around her husband to take Tommy's hand, fondly imperious. "Tommy, you are only just into San Francisco. Are you in too big a hurry to have coffee and stollen? Avram's own mother's recipe."

Tommy considered. Rosalie knew Tommy had a sweet tooth. "Polish cookin' again, rabbi?" He teased Avram with reference to the circumstances of their first meeting.

"No fish and no paprika this time," Avram murmured, hope renewed to see the unaccustomed cloud vanished again for the moment.

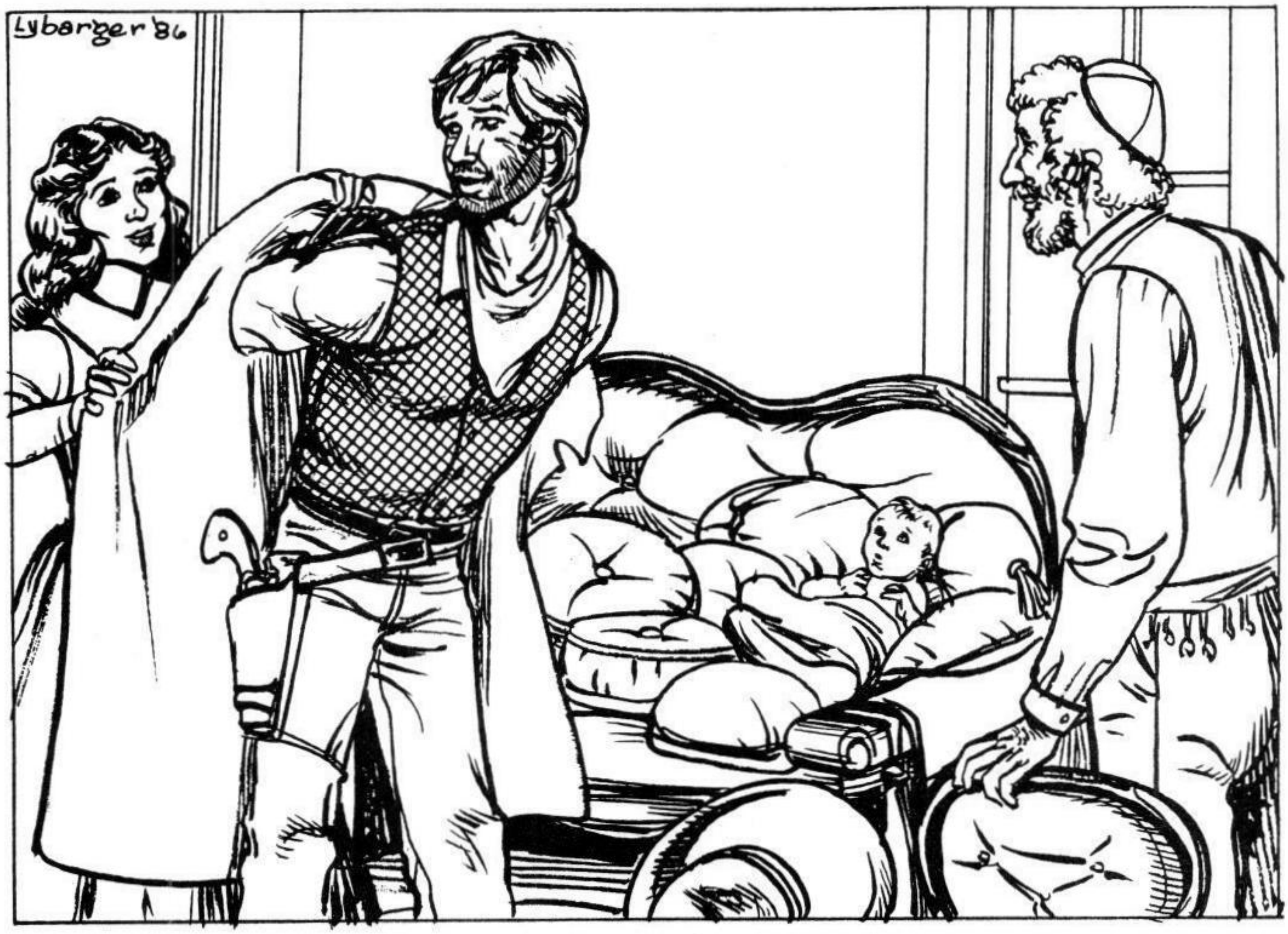
Even as Tommy vacillated, Rosalie drew him commandingly into the foyer. "Besides, you don't have time to say hello to Avigar? Especially if you won't come back tonight. A baby changes a great deal between three months and six."

Tommy nodded his good-natured defeat, allowing her to pull him along in her wake. Avram thoughtfully considered the wagon and animals for a moment before shutting the door and following wife and friend into the parlor.

Tommy had discovered Avigar blinking like a tiny owl in his nest of blankets and pillows on the sofa where his father loved to have him near his desk. The big hat plopped absently to the braided rug, and he was in the act of crouching eye level with the bemused infant when Rosalie forestalled him. "Tommy, let me have the coat, I will see to it."

"Huh? Oh, yeah." Tommy belatedly recalled his whitened appearance. "Sorry, Rosalie, kind of a mess, huh?" Gingerly, with her pulling on the shoulders, he divested himself of the duster with only a small cloud of powdery alkalai. As she bustled away to the back of the house, he sheepishly regarded the pall dulling the pattern of the rug. He dragged the toe of his boot, his ineffectual attempt to eradicate, scuffing the fine grains into the braid. "Shoulda slapped off better on the porch, I guess."

Less and less did Avram like his friend's stiff discomfort. Tommy should have roared in like an enthusiastic cataclysm, cheerfully dispensing dust, confusion, and affection. "No, no, it's nothing. We didn't give you time, after all." He made an elaborate show of discovering Rosalie had already set out the tray with its coffeepot. "Ah, here it is ready, and I have been smelling it to distraction forever. Come, sit, I will pour coffee."



As Avram hurried to the table, Tommy hunkered down to trade stares with the tiny boy. "Hi, Shorty. Figure you don't remember me, huh?" The resonant voice lightened an octave. He offered a long forefinger for inspection as he questioned softly, "You got teeth started there, fella, or is it a mite early?" He rescued his finger and substituted a corner of the blanket.

Avram replaced the coffeepot then turned to study Tommy's back, deliberately letting a second pass before venturing brightly, "So, my friend, you are back to stay awhile, I hope?"

Tommy kept his eyes on his friend's son. "Well, I guess not, Avram. Soon's I get that team converted into another grubstake, I'll be on my way back up again." The baby chewed solemnly with his attention fixed on the fascinatingly different face so near.

Avram's sigh was audible. Tommy glanced over his shoulder. "Maybe when I get back, I can stay a spell, Cuz." His quick, blazing grin was disarming. "Can't afford to right now. Like I said on the beach, gotta make a living."

Avram's eyes dropped to his lap, and his mouth folded resignedly into his beard. "I remember." His answer was quiet. "'People to see, banks to rob,'" he quoted without responding to the other's forced impishness. He had had the experience by then to know the cowboy had been covering emotion with humor, but the letter of his words had not been a joke.

His attempted levity fallen on silence, Tommy chose to sidestep the pause. He lifted Avigar from his blankets with a grunt and a chuckle. "Gettin' some heft to ya, you ole hoss," he addressed the baby as he experimentally hiked him over his head. Avigar responded with a piercing squeal and a wide, wet grin.

Avram cleared his throat and changed the subject--or seemed to. "I was talking to Papa Bender about the high prices of goods up in the camps--worse than here even! A dollar and seventy-five cents for an egg. An egg!"

Lazily stretched on the carpet with Avigar all milky gurgles poised above his head, Tommy obliged the opening, unaware. "Yeah, damn stiff. That's 'cause they gotta freight ever' blessed thing upriver then overland by wagon. Some of the remote camps, can't get in no way but pack train." He shrugged. "Gold's in the mountain, not growin' on bushes in Sacramento City. If you wanta eat or have canvas for a tent, you pay the freight."

Avram stored that information away with suppressed disturbance, intent on the opening Tommy had innocently provided. "Rosalie's papa is a good man. I am sorry for him. He would like to send goods to the camps--the places most don't go, where the prices would be best. But he needs someone who knows the area. If such a man had a wagon, he'd offer a consignment deal. A man could do very well."

"Guess he could," Tommy agreed neutrally. He sat up, hefting the solid little body into the crook of an elbow but his eyes were fixed on neither baby nor rabbi, nor even really the banked coals in the grate which seemed to claim his interest. "Myself, I got business up in the camps."

Avram detected neither the usual good natured impatience nor the patently overblown exasperation with which his friend usually responded to the rabbi's transparent manipulations. He left off toying with the sugar bowl to direct a troubled peek at the incisively defined profile. There had been that uncharacteristic hint of opacity in Tommy's mein, covering a darker emotion, as when he had spoken of his lack of success. For a moment, he was keenly reminded of his friend's restlessness; from boots to untrimmed bronze thatch, the long, lean frame was a study in pent nervous energy, the more noticeable for the contrast of the baby on his arm.

Gently reasonable, Avram protested. "Surely after the long trip all the way back to San Francisco, your business can wait on a visit, Tommy."

Tommy broke the moment with cheerfully mock exasperation. "Hey, Cuz, you heard I didn't find no gold--just a wagon and six mules. I gotta sell the rig if I'm going to stick around. If you want me to hang onto it and haul freight..." He paused, shrewdly scapegrace triumph directed at Avram. "Well, then I have to go back anyway."

Rosalie chose that moment to reappear through the kitchen door with the stollen hot and resplendent on its fluted plate. Under cover of the lavish praise and anticipation from both Tommy and Avram, Rosalie traded speaking glances with her husband. There was more relief than anticipation in the interruption, and she had obviously heard the end of the conversation.

She sailed over and expertly claimed her son from Tommy as he regained his feet. His hands freed, Tommy spread them, smiled at Rosalie, and finished his argument to Avram. "I just don't do so good workin' for somebody else, Cuz, but thanks for trying."

Avram sighed and shrugged contritely. "Just into the city and already I am a *nodge*. I am sorry, Tommy. I just fall over my feet a little, wanting to share my happiness with my best friend." His smile was distributed equally between Tommy and Rosalie, who smiled quickly in return as she patted the baby against her shoulder.

The two men pulled up chairs to the little parlor table. "Avram, will you cut while it is nice and hot, while I put Avigar down for his nap?" She nodded graciously at Tommy's complimentary exclamation over his first bite, and slipped from the room with all the brisk aplomb of a new mother.

* * *

Rosalie shushed the excited child with a mental sigh. So soon after only three months! Avram, inexplicably, wasn't even elated--which was the main consolation to being invaded by so extravagantly untrammeled a presence. Murmuring into the sweet creases of her baby's neck, she shifted him to the other shoulder as she swept from the room. She went with misgivings, rescuing son and leaving husband with a force of Nature neither to be checked nor deflected.

As she smoothed the light blanket, and rocked the cradle for a moment, she could not avoid recalling his arrival for the *bris*. How utterly scandalized, the tall Westerner had been. Having safely gotten Avram through blizzards, Indians, monks, and bandits, he had a somewhat proprietary interest in the welfare of his friend's infant son. Her mouth quirked ruefully even now. With a house full of company and a kitchen full of bustling, well-meaning neighbor women to manage, she'd had to draw Avram from the toasts to carry off a belligerently suspicious Tommy before the nervous *mohel* sliced his own finger.

Avigar yawned hugely, and the rosebud lips remained parted, tucked up at one corner in lopsided appeal. Though she was satisfied he was drifting off, she barely refrained an unladylike snort. Did *all* menfolk emulate Tommy? To be fair, Avram didn't exactly pattern his ways after his friend--thank God!--but Rosalie did feel the need to protect her man from his own affectionate tolerance.

She gave the room a cursory inspection from the doorway. When she'd done so that day at the end of her son's first week, seizing a lull in the festivities, she'd overheard Tommy similarly availing himself of the fleeting privacy. Once more, still in his dusty trail clothes, the tall cowboy was bent over the bed talking in earnest reassurance to the drowsy baby who clutched his big thumb.

"Don't you worry none, lil' Cuz. Avram 'splained how you folks do these things. Sounds mighty chancey to me but, hell, he made you so I guess it's okay even if it's damn strange. Besides, I didn't trust that old fart so I checked a minute ago. You're fine, kid."

Yes, indeed, she considered on her way down the hall, she might have steadfastly refused to be shorn of her own chestnut mane to wear the elaborate wig of a proper married woman; she might be guilty of all the radical, new-fangled ideas her mother despaired of; but Tommy was an unsettling exception.

* * *

As she stepped silently back into the parlor, Tommy was evidently responding to a repeated invitation. "Jeb's up there somewhere. If he's not in the northern camps, he's in the southern ones along the San Joaquin."

"It's so important to find him you must go right back, Tommy?"

"Well, he *was* my partner, Cuz. Just wanna see how he made out." Tommy was affably teasing. "'Sides, if he ain't struck paydirt yet, maybe he'd not mind teaming up again."

"And he was the one who led you astray when there were no more beaver to trap!"

Tommy brought one hand from behind his head to scratch a whiskery chin thoughtfully. His manner was still broad. "Seems like there weren't much 'leading' to it, Cuz. I was just a dumb-ass kid, but he weren't much older, and, shee-it, but he was the one said trains'd got too hot. I was the one stayed on takin' my chance. We shook an' he lit out for the gold fields." A big, long fingered brown hand sketched abstracts in the air.

Tommy reminded Rosalie of a pet puma around the house, purring in her pantry, gingerly uneasy among her teacups, lazily waving his paws in the air as he lay on his back in front of the small parlor grate.

Belatedly aware of her presence, both men sat up. Tommy seized the diversion to make his escape. He uncoiled from the rug, stood and tossed back the last swallow of his coffee. He picked up his hat. "Thanks, Rosalie. Mighty fine bakin'. But I gotta be goin' if I want half a chance of selling that rig today."

Avram stood also, trailing Tommy into the hall as he drew Rosalie along with an arm around her waist. "Where will you go?"

The Westerner turned his hat brim on the threshold. "The wharf, I reckon." He ended the awkward moment by dragging on his hat, beaming and shrugging. "Well, hey, I'll see ya later, okay?"

"Tommy!" Avram's call halted him on the steps. "Come back for Sabbath meal; we'll expect you."

Lillard lifted his shoulders, escaped out the little gate, and climbed to the wagon seat without looking back. He was already seated with reins in hand, clucking to the team before he waved brightly, "S'long, folks."

Rosalie was matter-of-fact as she ended the ensuing silence after the wagon had disappeared into the busy traffic. "What's troubling you, dear?"

Avram started, shook his head. "I could never conceal such a thing from you, could I?" His eyes grew fond. "How could you wrap around my heart so much in so short a time?" He touched her cheek, then his hand dropped as his expression grew doubtful. "I *am* worried. He could have sold that wagon and team on the spot for much more than they'll bring here where there are more such to be had. And if he is so anxious to return to the camps, why did he make the hard trip back here? He came back to see *us*; he came *home*; a thing he never knew he wanted. He still doesn't know it. He only feels it for now." Avram shook his head unhappily. "When he is restless like this, in need of money..."

She finished for him. "You are afraid he'll fall to mischief." Avram had long since confided his worries over Tommy. "Why press him, then? Maybe going back to the camps will give him the room and time he needs to work out what he wants."

Avram was grave as he led the way back inside. "There is more. Something happened in the camps. Tommy always spins the tale of his adventures. Such tall tales he tells! But this time, he very carefully did not talk about them. Yes, I worry about why he is going back to the camps. One thing I know, it is not to find his old partner. His face got the look it wore when he would have shot Matt Diggs. I have seen him angry, even furious, and I saw him then. It was not the same. Now, for a moment, I see it again, and I'm afraid to let him go back to the camps."

He stopped her in the hall to search her face as if to impress the depth of his concern. "He is no older than I, yet I think of never seeing him again."

Everything he said was undeniable. She had no comforting reply so she leaned on her toes to kiss his cheek and pat his arm. As her husband went back to his notes, Rosalie took the tray back to the kitchen, her thoughts irritated with the departed Westerner. She did not for a moment approve of him or trust his influence, resented the unconscious power he had over the tenor of her life, but the most exasperating thing about him was she liked him.

* * *

Tommy looped the ribbons of his team over the brake handle and climbed stiffly from the wagon. The pause to call on Avram had time for the pounding of the hard trip to settle into his muscles. He *had* pushed it, and now he found he ached as much from released tension as the grimly anxious drive back to Frisco. Unselfconsciously thorough as a cat, he arched his popping back and had regrets for Rosalie's offer of a hot tub.

The offwheel mule, Truman, flipped one long ear at his explosive sigh. Gertie, the other wheeler, craned around to lip Tommy's dusty shoulder. "You tend to your knittin', gal." Tommy emphasized the admonition with a firm shove on the offending muzzle. But his palm slapped gently down on the steel-dust shoulder. "Frisky after that water and breather, eh? Well, see you show some spark for a buyer. One way or the other, you're heading for oats tonight, and I'd sight sooner *he* paid for 'em!"

He let his hand rest a moment, both revelling in the relief that had flooded him when Avram had opened his door, and the mixed restlessness that always took him in that warm home which was not his. Not a bad team really; as short a time as they'd been in his hands, he'd had far worse in his mule skinning days. From being an unwelcome encumbrance at a time he'd been desperate to travel light, they'd been tireless and willing. "Thanks," he muttered into the gray hide. "I'll find you some decent pilgrim who'll appreciate what he's gettin'."

He stepped away from the wagon, keeping a wary eye on the heavy dock traffic as he picked a way across the roiled sea of mud in the middle of the street. He nodded optimistically toward the forested masts in the harbor. Yeah, easy to make good that promise with fresh hordes being disgorged down gangways as if they were a race of anxious lemmings, all heading for the gold fields...

His boots stomped onto the boardwalk with more force than merely to jar the gumbo from his clotted spurs. Maybe he shouldn't have come back, just stayed in the camps until... Irony deepened the slightly asymetrical lift of the curved lips into sour belligerence as he fingered the ridge of scar tissue in the hairline at the nape of his neck. He'd not have figured the bastard for owning the gall, not anymore.

He spared a last measuring glance for the wagon before he gave his attention to the emptying wharf. He shrugged. So he could have gotten a stake a dozen times already and been on his enemy's trail, but he'd still be up there. Tommy had not the least doubt of his man, not ever again now. But he'd been unsettled when he'd come around, anxious to see Avram, so, irresistably, he'd been drawn to Frisco. He had no regrets. The sight of that woolly-bearded, good-hearted puppy of a man safe and sound on his own porch had dispelled Tommy's clouds like magic.

But it was time to go back. Moving against the tide, he shifted his shoulders to thread the thinning traffic. Circling gulls were already growing bold enough to hop and pick among the refuse, while orange sunlight sliced long and low between shadowed bulk of warehouses. He'd left it late to find a buyer today.

Though he couldn't have stayed away--indeed his whole journey had been just to take him to Avram's door--in some ways his visit had been a mistake. Avram could always read him. Even now, Avram would have had the rest of the afternoon to imagine the worst, certain Tommy was keeping something serious from him. Tommy had scant intention of showing up by sundown. Bad enough to sit across the snowy linen, minding his elbows, but to have to avoid those mournful, china-blue eyes--prominent and guileless as a baby's and infinitely full of worried curiosity and reproach--while he pretended the rabbi's fears weren't justified?

"Shee-it!" The expletive brought him to an abrupt halt as he jammed the brim of his stetson low on his brow in a gesture of supreme frustration. The same cutting little early spring breeze which had been making him vaguely wish he hadn't left his duster at Rosalie's, made a gaudily painted canvas siding entice his attention far down the street away from the harbor.

Tommy scratched his stubbled chin, considering the casino; a game of Monte tempted as did the charms of the pulchritude depicted on the canvas. Tommy didn't like quandries--if he couldn't shoot or run from them, he was usually successful at displacing them. But he could as easily lose the team as win, especially with his mind not on his game, and he did need the stake. The women were a stronger temptation but he'd need his small cash to board wagon and team.

He'd resumed his lanky gait automatically after his halt, letting instinct choose his direction while he mulled the dubious option of bedding down in the hay with six mules instead of in a real feather bed with a bountifully endowed lady. He approved his instinct when he found himself approaching the dispatcher's office; just the place to catch a pilgrim fresh off the boat, burdened with cash savings and raring fierce to lay in supplies and truck. *I'm just the fella who can help ya, Cuz.* Tommy's long mouth relaxed into its more accustomed humorous leer as he approached the steps.

Before he could climb the five steps to the door, and almost as if his half-developed intentions had hurried to oblige him, a woman abruptly emerged on the landing, one hand clutching her reticule to the front of her short jacket, the other clenched and twisting in the fabric of her full skirt. He'd barely had an instant to register and pigeonhole sedate dark green traveling suit and meager figure--'flat as Kansas' joined 'respectable' to his automatic distinterest--when she bolted down the stairs apparently without seeing him for she ran straight into him. He confirmed his physical assessment at the same moment he realized how tiny she really was, no bigger than a girl or a squaw. The shading bonnet scarcely reached half-way up his chest. Her elbows were tight to her body as he reached to steady her recoil from the collision. She was rigid beyond any reaction to bumping into a strange man. Their apologies chimed, his affably perfunctory, her's rote...and quivering. In her agitation, she scarcely seemed to notice him. As she slid around him to continue on her way, he swung completely around to look after her. "Downright rabbity, that one."

The peculiarity held his fleeting curiosity just long enough for him to spot two things: her rush had slowed to a meandering walk, threading among the greasy coils of rope, bolsters and crates in so withdrawn, tentative a manner it shouted 'distress' to the experienced predator in Tommy. The other thing was itself two: a beefy lounger in greasy sailor's nanheen trousers and stocking cap, and a smaller one whose full sideburns were lost in blue jowls. Tommy had already observed and categorized them with the same prudent instinct he always grasped his surroundings. Even though they'd been too elaborately idle to be anything but lurking, he'd dismissed them. By the wordless signals common to men who understood each other, Tommy recognized a couple of alley opportunists and was just as confident they knew him for a man who'd be too much trouble. There was talk on the Committee of Vigilance barring guns within San Francisco limits, but so far it remained talk and Tommy remained armed. Now the disreputable pair began a seemingly random stroll away from the grog shop.

Part of Tommy impatiently jostled him to move on in search of a buyer so he could be assured some intriguing consolation above the casino as well as a stake. The other part was instinctively verifying the direction in which the two loafers were drifting. The woman had reached a massive stevedore who was just depositing a small traveling trunk in the mud. She seemed to be pleading with the man, an argument he ended simply by shrugging and walking away. After she'd stared a moment, the rigid back melted and she sank onto the trunk in a billow of tarleton.

Tommy's eye narrowed at the reticule lying forgotten in her lap while she tugged wearily at the bow of her bonnet. He silently willed her folk to come collect her. But not only did no frock-coated townsman--her natural counterpart--appear, something in her defeated posture when she snatched off the whole preposterous bonnet, told him no one was meeting her...and since the stevedore had disappeared up the nearest gangway, the strollers had picked up speed.

Tommy sighed, rolled his eyes upward in martyred annoyance, and lengthened his own stride so that he could casually take a stand in their path while he vaguely searched his pockets for makings of a smoke. The toughs checked, exchanged barest glances of agreement and parted smoothly to step around him on each side. Tommy just as smoothly took a seemingly random step back to keep both in view.

His left hand had found his tobacco pouch in a vest pocket. He drew it out, filled a paper, and restored the pouch to its place. His smile was pointedly affable while he licked the edge and rolled the makings one-handed; his right hand dropped to rest absently on the butt of the long-barrelled Colt holstered low and tied down on his thigh. The long fingers remained competently at ease. The pair exchanged more definite silent consultation. The ex-sailor lifted one shoulder in a shrug. *Your game.* The busy-cheeked one's eyes narrowed then slid sideways. *If he'd had a tail, he'd have tucked it,* thought the wolf-wise Tommy. He watched them amble nonchalantly all the way back to the grog shop and vanish inside before he took his hand off the pistol to strike a match. He exhaled smoke in sharp exasperation, perfectly aware that two pairs of ferel eyes were watching from the shadowed half-door.

She had not stirred, the whole stand-off having occurred between two breaths and the next. The chestnut wisps that had escaped the shining, severe plaits danced in fine curls against wide cheekbones in the freshening salt breeze. They were the same russet shade as Rosalie's--or his mother's--though what had put *that* notion in his head? He preferred redheads and after that, blonds. The coquettish touch starkly contrasted with the shadowed hollows of cheek and closed eye and enigmatically folded kitten mouth. She was so white and still, he wondered if she was ill.

He took a thoughtful pull on his cigarette as he approached, irritated to have become her keeper by default. He didn't know what to say to 'good women' except "hand it over" and "thankee kindly, ma'am"--which didn't seem appropriate to the occasion. He dragged deep at the tobacco, stalling, half-wishing her husband/brother/nephew/cousin would suddenly appear to claim her, and unwilling to waste the smoke when his funds were so low.

Right. Grownup waifs with no more sense than a baby. When he'd come across the rabbi, a lost and hungry tenderfoot, at least Avram wasn't this green in a city. The remembered image of the starving rabbi waist-deep in a stream chasing trout with a sharpened branch brought both a mental smile and rueful grimmace.

There she sat as if she'd never move except possibly to keel over. The parallels were sourly obvious. He reluctantly toed out the stub of his cigarette and bent over her with a shrug. She was neither winsome nor robust, with a chin too pointed and positive for the former, and height and figure too meager for the latter--a complete waste of his shortening time--the sooner unloaded on a hotel clerk or boardinghouse porch, the better. "Ma'am...?"

The bruised-looking lids flew open. Hugely startled, the cornflower eyes were so deep a blue they were almost violet. He stopped short, irrationally reminded of the eyes of a lynx kitten he'd found dying in one of his traps during his beginning as a mountain man. The random impression made him back a pace, beaming reassurance as he flicked two fingers against the brim of his hat. "Didn't mean to startle you there, ma'am. I saw ya come outta that dispatcher's office."

"Oh, I..."

"'Fact, I was the one ya ran into--"

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean--"

"Ya didn't look so good. You all right? You got folk meeting you or mebbe 'spectin' you?"

Her mouth was describing a blank little "O" of nervousness. She shut it quickly and swallowed before she replied. "Thank you, sir, for your consideration. I'm quite well, really. Merely a little tired." She made a busy show of smoothing the glossy plaits and re-donning her bonnet. Shadowed by the green, she was more like ivory than ever.

"Beggin' yer pardon, ma'am, but you don't *look* good."

"No, honestly, I'm very well. Please excuse me. I must arrange transport for myself and my trunk." She stood and smoothed out the wrinkles in her skirt, and flashed a bright, false smile.

"Can I mebbe take you somewhere? I've a wagon and team over there."

She hesitated, studying him while trying not to seem to assess him. "I'm expecting to meet my husband, Kevin Sullivan, but I'm unsure of exactly where to find him. It would be a kindness if you could direct me to a decent hotel that's not too dear."

Tommy leaned back, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. "Um, well, Miz Sullivan, findin' a room at all, 'specially this late, is gonna be a real trick, and as fer not costin' plenty, well, look around. Half this town is still canvas, and half the rest is scaffolds and piles of brick. They cain't build fast enough fer all the folks coming' in. We'd better just get a move on and get you settled in." Before she could temporize further, he hefted the little trunk onto his shoulder with a supple twist. "This all yer trunk, ma'am?"

"I--yes, but..."

"Right over here's my wagon." Tommy cut across her, anxiously aware of lengthening shadows. Too late to sell the team today--he needed to get them bedded at the stable down the street from Avram's house, and since what money he had left would have to go for their board, effectively curtailing his half-formed plans for the evening, he had to be on time for supper at Avram's.

He stowed her trunk in the boot and handed her up to the seat. As he swung up litely beside her and gathered the reins, she ventured in a low voice, "Mister..."

"Lillard, Tommy Lillard, ma'am."

"Mr. Lillard, what sort of prices might I expect?"

Something a shade too hollow in her tone made him glance at her in frank appraisal before he moved expertly into the flow of traffic, mostly heavy drays. She was not looking at him, her concentration fixed on the reticule in her lap, the cords of which she was picking to pieces. He considered as he clucked to the team. No point in lying. She'd learn first stop. "Well, I know a faro dealer has a room with a window for a thousand a month..." Her gasp drew his eyes from his driving. She choked a little and the reticule slid to her feet. They reached simultaneously to retrieve it and he discovered her hands were icy.

Resettled, her eyes averted, she spoke again hesitantly. "Mr. Lillard, would you know where I might post an advertisement for a governess or perhaps paid companion to some older lady? I...don't believe I can afford both a notice in the newspaper and any extended lodgings."

"Uh, ma'am? Don't take me wrong but San Francisco is pretty much a city of men--it's business and cards and roulette, and...well, other things. Could maybe be work in a chop house or bath house, or laundry--'cept mostly Chinks do that--but ain't much call yet fer the kind of things you said. 'Course women come out to get married, too, but ya got a husband. Don't worry, yer husband can take care of the bill."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her put one gloved hand to her face and the thin shoulders shuddered a moment. Tommy didn't claim hunches as a rule except in the way of business--like was the train guard likely to try for his gun--but at the moment, a strong one prompted him to guide his wagon out of the flood of drays and pull up near a mercantile. He held the ribbons firmly in his left hand and turned in the seat toward her. "Miz Sullivan, can ya maybe trust me to say what's wrong?"

She sat frozen in her attitude for a breath, then her hand dropped futilely. "Mr. Lillard, I don't know where Kevin is. He came to the gold fields three months ago. I've come to look for him and everything I own is in that trunk and I have just spent six weeks finding a sea voyage less bracing than reputed."

Tommy digested the implications in the first two revelations quickly, thought a moment about the last and grinned in spite of himself. "Seasick, huh?"

She stammered halfway between rueful laughter and her tightly suppressed tears. "As green as my dress!"

Tommy awkwardly patted her on the shoulder and reached a decision he'd half-subconsciously suspected all along some prankist fate had set up. "Say, Mis Sullivan. I know yer married name's Sullivan but pardon my notin', that colorin' of yours strikes me as what I've seen called Black Irish."

Her smile disappeared stiffly. "Your supposition is correct, Mr. Lillard." She enunciated the "Mister" with deliberate clarity. "My father was John Gerald McKenna of good family and himself a prominent lawyer."

"Now, ma'am, I wasn't intendin' no insult. What I was gettin' to was, might you likely be Catholic then?"

"Perhaps you ought to put me down here, sir. I can inquire further at this mercantile."

"Please, ma'am, I need to know if it's okay by yer rules if ya eat kosher stuff, 'cause that's all Rosalie serves, 'specially Avram being a rabbi an' all."

Laurie stared at the cowboy until she remembered her mouth was open and shut it hastily on a swallow. She felt the heat in her cheeks and knew she was pink with remorse at her defensive assumptions. Amid her scattered conclusions, one idea emerged and she seized it. "Ah...Mr. Lillard, excuse me, I don't wish to misunderstand, but are you saying you'll take me to the house of some friend of yours?"

"They're good people, Miz Sullivan, and it's all right--they're married, are Avram and Rosalie, got a baby boy. Respectable, you know? Avram's the preacher like, for his folks."

She winced at his diffidence. *Well, after your reaction, what is he to suppose your concern is?* she told herself grimly. "Oh, it's not that, Mr. Lillard, please, I meant no reflection on your friends. It's I who should apologize for uncharitably hasty conclusions. I only meant...oh, dear." After six years as Kevin Sullivan's wife and five of them maintaining a wounded pride in front of too knowing servants, she'd not expected to be flustered so easily. It did not help that when she had opened her eyes, startled by feel of a presence bending over her, he had been sharply limned as if from a flat background, an image seen whole and complete in every detail from rough clothing casually defining a long, rangy body to the palette of colors dominated by brown and bronze, setting the contrast for a while grin and vividly direct malachite eyes.

At such close range, his vitality was unnerving. She'd concentrated nervously on his hands holding the reins, gradually allowing herself furtive sidelong glimpses of the sharply intent profile as he drove. It was not a tame face, but she made herself meet his mystified gaze. *Ninny,* she hissed at herself.

Aloud, she recovered her manners. "Mr. Lillard, are you proposing to have your friends put me up for the night? Won't that be a terrible imposition?"

Instead of answering her, Lillard measured the building rooftops over her shoulder, shrugged whimsical defeat at the molten pattern of late sun concentrated behind the open fanwork on the facade of the merchantile. "Only if we don't make it soon enough before sundown so's I can clean up and shave 'fore dinner. Their Sunday starts in about an hour and bathin' counts as workin', y'see."

This time Laurie managed to hang onto her composure. "I would be most grateful, Mr. Lillard."

"Ma'am, don't take it familiar, but that's an awful lot of mister. Name's Tommy."

"Oh...thank you...Tommy." Laurie sat in correct silence as he clicked his tongue and snapped the reins to the team. She rather wished he hadn't done that. Mere courtesy demanded a similar concession she felt. Yet here she was, in a strange city, in a wagon with an unknown man of dubious class, on the way to a night's meal and lodging with not merely strangers but alien people. Relief that she was finding succor vied with her fear and bewilderment. That atypical daring that had sustained her through the legal humiliations, the auction, and flight with the remains of her inheritance had been all but exhausted by the time she'd sunk onto her luggage on the wharf.

And now Jews! True, she wasn't the best of Catholics, even less than her kind but remote father. The parade of governesses cared only that she and her sister wore to Mass the dresses proper to age and station and that she crossed herself with the correct hand. Jews were not seen in her well-ordered brownstone neighborhood. Only on those two brief occasions never repeated, when she'd gone uptown to Kevin's office had she seen some in the street, with their great beards and long coats and shining prayer curls, looking as exotic as the Arabian Nights to her.

Dismay roused her as she realized the wagon was pulling up alongside a low white fence. Tommy Lillard had been seemingly oblivious to her brooding, whistling in an off-hand undertone, elbows relaxed on knees as he drove. Now he leaped down from her perch and she wondered if he'd felt the need to reassure the mules or her.

"I'll just be a minute, Miz Sullivan."

"Mr. Lillard..."

"It's Tommy, ma'am, remember?"

"Tommy...are you sure..."

"Well," he admitted forthrightly, "it's sudden on Rosalie, an' it ain't my house to ask ya in. But Avram, he'd give welcome to a bank robber and Rosalie wouldn't stand for no lady to be lost with no roof for the night. I'll just go ahead of ya and give 'em a holler. It'll be all right, Miz Sullivan."

Before he could turn up the short walk, she leaned down with the sudden earnest candor of the shy and blurted, "Tommy? I'm not just Miz Sullivan. My given name is Laurelle, Laurie."

He nodded warm approval and ran lightly up the steps to knock briskly. As footsteps approached, he tossed her an impishly curling smile that made his eyes merry. He winked and gave her an encouraging thumbs up just before the door opened.

A pretty, brown-haired woman in an apron stood framed, her hands lightly on the doorjambs. One hand went out to Tommy as soon as she recognized him. Laurie could not hear the conversation but the woman's hand went concernedly to her breast and she craned around the broad-shouldered man toward Laurie and the wagon. A variety of emotions too obscure to read were visible in quick succession across her features. Then she shook his sleeve impatiently, seemed to scold him, and then made shooing motions with her apron.

Laurie sat mystified and apprehensive on the wagon seat as a man appeared out of the hall at the woman's side. Nearly of a height with Tommy Lillard, he nevertheless appeared somehow slighter and smaller. Perhaps it was his air of childlike enthusiasm. In spite of her position, Laurie had to sternly control an impulse to chuckle. A Jewish leprechaun, indeed. Yet his wholehearted energy reminded her irrepressibly of the Irish elves. This person she heard quite clearly from the porch.

"So why are you waiting, my friend? You think your lady in distress would not find a welcome? Such a *meshuginah*!" The bearded man beckoned. "Well, bring her in, bring her in. Don't leave her on the wagon."

"Thanks, Cuz, I'll just drop off her trunk and get on the way."

As Tommy stepped to the edge of the porch, the bearded man seized his arm and the dismay was clear in his tone. "Tommy! I thought...are you not staying?"

"Why sure, Avram. Said I would, after all. But I gotta hustle if I'm gonna get this rig to the stable and back before sundown." Tommy's grin turned wicked. "If I didn't learn anything else, I remember about this Sabbath of yours."

The one called Avram beamed and gave his friend's arm a mock shaking. Then he started down the steps with Tommy, almost capering with eagerness. "So hurry up and we'll settle in the lady's trunk so you can get back."

In a moment, Laurie was peering down into a lively, curly-bearded face with bright blue eyes that were astonishingly gravely kind in previously so antic a figure.

"Laurie, Miz Sullivan, this here's my best friend, Avram Belinsky--he's the rabbi hereabouts. An' the lady holdin' the door for us is his wife, Rosalie. Avram, Miz Sullivan sailed all the way from New York lookin' for her husband, Kevin Sullivan."

Avram gently took Laurie's hand. "Mrs. Sullivan, please come down. We will have the fine supper Rosalie has prepared. Then you will get some rest. Oy! I know about long ocean voyages! Tommy can maybe do some asking around tomorrow." He patted the hand he held and his English became yet more heavily accented. "But the main thing is, you should not worry. It will all work out. Meanwhile, a little schnaaps to put some color back in your cheeks, hey?"

Tommy took her other hand and helped her down. As he and Avram carried the trunk between them, Rosalie came down the porch steps urging Laurie inside to rest.

Laurie, abashed and uncertain, lingered in the foyer to watch Tommy and the rabbi wrestle the modest case around the newel post. Then with an arm attentively on her shoulders, Rosalie swept her up in their wake.

"Avram, put the trunk in the extra bedroom. Tommy, I'll make you up a bed on the parlor sofa, but you bathe and change in our room, all right? Avram and I have finished."

Tommy straightened from depositing the trunk, his expression ruefully humorous. "I gotta go stable those animals..." he began.

Laurie looked from one to the other. "Mr. Lillard, Tommy, I'm afraid I'm putting you out of your room. Mrs. Belinsky? Please, I don't need any place special. I'd..."

Rosalie was whisking around, opening a window, straightening a bureau runner in an immaculate room with the particular mettle of one woman offering hospitality to another. "Not at all, my dear. Tommy is only just back in town--a good thing I have made up fresh linen. He is used to putting up in strange places, and he knows our sofa is very comfortable." She poised in mid-pirouette to rest hands on her aproned hips. "So go," she shooed Tommy. "Soon it is sundown. Go right into the bedroom when you return; I'll have your bath all drawn."

Avram stood on the threshold hiding his amusement in his beard except for twinkling eyes. Tommy slanted a glance at him and laughed outright, throwing his head back. Laurie caught herself following up the long, strong line of brown throat where it emerged from the loosely tied blue bandana. She turned quickly to lay her reticule on the bureau before either men noticed.

"Okay, Rosalie. I'm on my way."

"I will see you out, Tommy, but be quick, my friend. It's your favorite tonight--roast chicken."

Laurie tugged at her gloves, concentrating on her hands as she listened to the diminishing jingle of spurs on the stairs and tried to ignore the thoughtful silence in the bedroom.

Rosalie waited politely until Laurie had to meet her gaze. "Mrs. Sullivan, would you like some hot water to freshen up also? Tommy mentioned that you had a difficult voyage. Such a long way from New York!"

"Oh, please!" Laurie sighed fervently and began to shrug out of her little jacket. "And, please, Mrs. Belinsky," she put out a hand, "after so much kindness, please, I'm just Laurie."

Rosalie's smile made her brown eyes warm. "Laurie, then. And I am just Rosalie." She put her hands in her apron pockets and lingered in the doorway to ask with innocent interest, "Tommy said you were trying to find your husband."

Laurie hesitated. "I'll be honest, Rosalie. I don't believe Kevin is in San Francisco." She hurried on, forestalling the questions she saw in the other woman's perplexity. "I *know* that he came to California to improve his fortunes. He *said* he was embarking for San Francisco."

"And you think he may have gone up to the camps?" Rosalie finished.

Laurie nodded, biting her lips. "Kevin *is* a bit of a gambler, and somewhat impatient. Yes, I think he might try his luck there."

"He didn't give you any clue, leave any word?" Rosalie asked in concern.

Laurie deliberately folded the jacket, hugged it in her crossed arms as she turned to the bed before she answered. "He wasn't sure of his plans before he left. He...he said to expect a telegram when he was settled. But it's been three months. The voyage is no more than six weeks!" At Rosalie's soft little sound of commiseration, she rounded quickly. "I'm sure he's in the camps. He's very proud and wouldn't send for me until he could support me. But I have a little money. I came into my inheritance two months ago." She fidgetted under Rosalie's tender regard. She flung the folded jacket onto the bed and clasped her hands tightly behind her back, chin lifting, unconsciously repeating old mannerisms as her words came out in a release of pent breath. "I want to outfit and find a trustworthy guide up to the camps."

Rosalie's eyes kindled like sherry held to the light, enthusiasm belying the gentle caution in her response. "Ah, Laurie, three months in the camps can be a man's lifetime. Be careful of anticipating success. But...yes, don't worry. I will speak to Avram. Something can be arranged I am sure." She took a hand from her pocket to pat Laurie's arm. Then her expression became comically alarmed. "And goodness! I must get the water or we'll never be ready in time for Sabbath!"

As she whisked away, the flash of spotless white apron was echoed on her countenance, and her voice drifted back up the hall tinged with inexplicable satisfaction. "I'll just lay out Tommy's brown suit and razor, then be right back with your hot water."

Laurie closed the bedroom door and leaned on it thoughtfully. She seemed to have been in luck for the first time in memory. Somehow, she had been guided to friendly shores. In her heart of hungry hearts, she offered a little prayer that these good people were what they appeared. Perhaps indeed they could help her in her quest. She faced the room and began to unbutton her bodice as she again approached the bed. Standing in her camisole, she rubbed her bare arms in a momentary flash of guilt. Perhaps, just perhaps, it would all work out, and then it would not matter after all that in all she'd revealed to Rosalie there had been one lie...

* * *

Rosalie Belinsky peeked through the cracked kitchen door in a glow of smugness. As much as that vivid face could ever be civilized, Tommy, resplendent in stock and gold cravat which sparked the matching glitter in his eyes, cut a positively breathtaking effect. She cocked her head surveying the sideways view critically. Yes, indeed, never mind that he presently looked about as determinedly comfortable as when he'd claimed the Best Man's kiss at her and Avram's wedding. He looked absolutely, eligible! She let the door swing softly shut and moved to the sideboard with her bowl.

Voices drifted through the door as she frowned at not finding what she searched for and pulled open the pantry door. Crouched astraddle the cool cellar, her hands on the ring, her frown deepened. She'd left on an undercurrent of shared amusement. If Laurie had caught it, she could only be mystified at the private joke among Tommy, Avram and, secretly, Rosalie. In seguing from a general discussion of Sabbath customs--the Irish woman had been wide-eyed at Rosalie's prayer shawl and the candles--Tommy's recounting of his first Sabbath in Avram's company smoothly sidestepped any reference to the hanging posse unnervingly close on the trail of a scapegrace bank robber and his bemused 'accomplice.' "Indians," Tommy had deftly substituted. Well, Indians *had* chased them later, even--she shuddered as always, in secondhand memory--caught them...it had been an eventful journey.

But now the voices had changed pitch. Avram's outrages as well as enthusiams tended to elevate in octaves. Hastily, she laid hands on the crock she wanted and dropped the cellar door. She regained her balance with a grimace as Avram's earnest, anxious tones filtered clearly even into the pantry.

"But, Tommy, *why* won't you guide Mrs. Sullivan?"

"Rabbi, I *told* ya..." Tommy seldom called Avram by his title except when his baritone carried that edge of exasperation--when he was perilously close to shouting.

Avram's sweetly reasonable words cut across Laurie's hurriedly disclaiming an unwilling conscript. "But you said yourself, you wanted to hunt for your old partner. You are not going away to mine gold at once. Why not help Laurie find her husband? You can go together through the camps both looking for the person each of you want."

"The camps where *I'm* goin' just ain't no place for a woman. I ain't stayin' in Stockton or Sacramento City, ya'know."

"All the more reason to provide the lady an escort."

"I *do* intend to go, Mr. Lillard. Alone if I must." The new voice was quiet but vibrant with a determination Rosalie suspected was unaccustomed by its very careful control.

Into the tiny silence, Tommy's response was itself unwontedly harsh. "For how long, ma'am? A man can disappear forever up there in a month's time. How long ya figure to spend yer time and money?"

"If, if I don't find him, then still I should hear *something*...one way or another. Mr. Lillard, Tommy, don't you see I must know? You imply I'll need my money to start over. But how can I behave like a...," her voice stumbled, "widow, if I'm not?"

Back to mister and ma'am. This would never do. Rosalie swept briskly through the door onto a stoney tableau across the gleaming china.

A pink spot bloomed in each of Laurie's pale cheeks and her hands were out of sight in her lap as she leaned earnestly across her plate. Avram had his hands interlaced over his tucked napkin, regarding Tommy with lifted brows, the very picture of a paternally and gently accusing rabbi. The object of both their attention truculently studied his drumstick, thumbs hooked in his waistcoat pocket.

Avram loosened his hands to raise one finger triumphantly. "A partnership! Tommy, you said yourself the prices are high up there. You still have your wagon." He stabbed the finger excitedly at Laurie. "Laurie, you might invest in some small, easily transportable goods, luxuries like pins and needles."

"Well..."

"Yes, yes." Buoyed with enthusiasm, Avram gestured animatedly between them, attention bouncing back and forth. "Two days--no more--you could be ready to travel. Think, Tommy, you don't want to work for someone else. This way you buy outright, no consignment. Whatever you make is profit between the two of you: Laurie's goods, your wagon and guidance."

"What about you folks not doing business on a Saturday?" Tommy's growl was addressed to his drumstick.

Rosalie swapped the hot bowl from hand to hand. She almost could see the gitter of unsheathed steel and her mouth went dry. She had no fears for Avram. The coiled violence she'd vividly glimpsed in Tommy the day he'd stood with drawn gun over the enemy who'd shot him, who was even then threatening Avram, never failed to frighten her. But his killing rage that day had more than half been in concern for Avram. And it was Avram--her sweetly even-handed, quietly heroic Avram--who had resolved the deadly stand off, saving Matt Diggs' life. For Avram's sake, Tommy had let live a man who'd ambushed and shot him. No, Rosalie had no fear for Avram, even as her husband coughed diffidently and explained that Gentiles staffed Papa Bender's mercantile.

But there was desperation in Tommy's intractable refusal. "Well, now, Avram, I'm surprised at ya, man of God and all. Here y'all are suggestin' I escort this lady here all over the roughest country a mule ever staggered through an' *no chaperone*." He spread his hands in triumph at the new tack.

Avram's own desperation recalled his earlier fear and an idea crystalized in Rosalie's mind: for sake of her husband's sure grief if he lost his friend, even for Tommy's own rapscallion sake, he was *not* going back to some violent rendezvous. She sighed mentally. Time enough later to plan extended campaigns to give that Quixotic streak of Tommy's time to work its wiles. For the moment--before that moment was lost--if she had to throw a cordon of innocents around Tommy, she'd not let him go without waifs to shepherd. Thank God for Tommy's Achilles heel, and Rosalie smiled. "Moishe!"

Three heads herked around as if she were mad. Laurie's face was blankly curious; on Avram's was the beginnings of eager surmise. She almost laughed aloud in real humor, in relief at the comically winded shock that registered on Tommy.

"Moishe?" he asked weakly.

"Uncle Lek's boy, you remember," she enlarged unnessarily. Tommy knew Moishe Bender.

The sick understanding Tommy sent Avram had no effect on Avram's ready uptake. "Of course, Moishe! Do the boy a world of good to be away from his books a while, too. A scholar should see a little life first hand as well. Look at me," he said happily.

"Moishe?" Tommy repeated plaintively in as close to a whimper as Rosalie had ever heard. The deadly glint had been extinguished utterly in a slackened jaw.

Giving no quarter, Rosalie smiled in ruthlessly blithe charm as she shimed with her husband. "Of course!"

"I'll speak to Lek Bender tomorrow." Avram clapped hands together, rubbing them in satisfaction, all resolutions obviously concluded.

Tommy sat back in his chair bemused. Rosalie leaned hospitably over Laurie's shoulder with the steaming bowl. "Buttered carrots, dear?"

* * *

"Laurie? Miz Sullivan?" Tommy's gruff hail stayed Laurie three steps up the stairs.

She did not respond, her eyes fastened on the whitened hand on the bannister. She felt rather than saw him approach to the foot of the stairs, standing in oddly commanding stillness in the well formed by the newel post.

"Miz Sullivan? Avram gets kinda carried away with his managing. Guess it's bein' a rabbi an' all. But if all these plans are too fast for you, or you got second thoughts, just say the word."

Laurie winced though the gravely spoken words were a million miles distant from Kevin's silky undermining. She did not look at him. "I'm all too aware you don't want to be burdened with me, Mr. Lillard. I suppose it is a poor return for your earlier kindness, but I *am* determined to find news of my husband." At last she ventured a glance over the rail into his upturned face. She was unprepared for his forthright lack of contempt. She quickly averted her own eyes from those too direct deep-set ones. "I do need help to make my way in those places, Mr. Lillard, and...everything I still own has gone into this expedition. I can't afford pride. I'll have to hold you to the plan." Her nerve quailed at his continued silence and she stammered in a small voice. "I'm sorry. I hope at least the business venture will be to your advantage."

"Laurie, ma'am?" His tone surprised her into looking back down at him. His brown hand rested on the bannister next to hers without touching. "I want you to know none of this had anything to do with you. Just ain't--I mean--don't you have any folks back home?"

She spared a bleak thought for Mady and Claude, shocked into waxworks in their brocaded parlor, the one Limoge cup irretrievably in shards at the hem of her sister's skirt. "Yes." She discouraged elaboration by withdrawing her attention to the darkened window above the landing. She heard him sigh, sensed him shake his head futilely, caught the half-murmur.

"Don't know how they let a little lady like you just up an' run off..."

"I don't know a great deal, Mr. Lillard. But I can learn. I think I can. I'll try not to be a bother or in the way."

It was a near whisper and he visibly jumped, squared his shoulders. "Guess you'll do just fine, ma'am. I didn't mean it that way. It'd have been anybody. There's business I needed to travel fast and light for but...it'll probably keep, an' if something comes up...well, I'll work out something." Admiringly... "Your husband must be a hellava man to have you up and come after him so far. I think you're a brave lady, and my name ain't Mr. Lillard. It's still Tommy."

The foyer was sunk in gloom; Avram having already passed through extinguishing lamps. Rosalie had already made up the sofa in billowing comforters and feather pillows and left Tommy to settle in while she disappeared on mysterious errands upstairs. Only the lamp by the mirror at the head of the stairs cast a cone of illumination down the stairwell like a spotlight in darkness. It gleamed gold off the thick hair, burnished a brown broadcloth shoulder, made a black and gold patter in damascene of the shadowed features. Teeth gleamed.

Her return smile trembled and she whispered hastily, "Good night and thank you, Tommy," as she all but fled up the stairs.

* * *

Laurie sighed as she laid aside her hairbrush. Her reflection cocked its head as she reached up, deftly divided her streaming brown fall in her fingers and began to plait a neat braid. She traded a thoughtful gaze with her double. "Never mind," she whispered, "the butterflies were this big when you booked passage in New York, and you got here--undrowned, unscalped. This time you won't even be alone."

Still, there was another deep breath as she finished the braid and her hands dropped into her lap. "But you don't even know these people. All right, they were kind, but...oh, it's all so different." The last was barely aloud as she leaned elbows on the vanity and laid cold cheek against cold cheek of the woman in the glass, a woman she couldn't fool, and who, to her eyes, looked as mouse-like and unconfident as she felt. In fact, she looked exactly the picture of the plain older sister who'd fled her sister's scarcely reined contempt and her brother-in-law's grudgingly dutiful hospitality.

She straightened and squared her shoulders. Even of *that*! The soldier at attention in the mirror tossed the other half of the mane forward on her shoulder so brusque fingers could make quick work of the last braid. *There's no going back, my girl.* Certainly after that little interview with Mady and Claude in the parlor. Her cheeks flamed. *Even with the door closed, I swear every servant in the house heard what Mady said to me--and Claude never stopped her. How could I go back even if she'd have me? Why do you hate me, little Mady? You were always the pretty one, the nurses and then the governesses dressed you better than the doll father gave me. There was only three years between us and with Father so often occupied, we had only each other. Was it really so terrible of me to keep books for old Mrs. Conner?*

In spite of the bleak cast of her thoughts, a little *frisson* of anticipation lifted the corners of her mouth. Whatever would proper, scandalized Claude say if he knew she was not only going "into trade" after all, but to the very edge of civilization in the company of a great brown frontiersman with only a half-grown young Jew for a chaperone. The tiny smile deepened, displaying the dimples in her cheeks. She'd always secretly been struck by her brother-in-law's resemblance to a codfish. Now she pictured him as one beached, jaws popping reflexively on the pristine platter of the conservative stock and cravat Claude favored. She curbed a desire to giggle as a symptom of hysteria.

Whatever else might be said, Kevin was a remarkably handsome man. Regular of feature, carved from ivory was Kevin, with a single heavy lock of blue-black hair which would resist his brush until he had to apply pomade. Her smile faded. She rose abruptly from the vanity. She considered the inviting feather bed while she chaffed her arms in sudden chill. She'd pull up the extra quilt from the foot. In spite of the spring weather, she found the evening breeze a little uncomfortable. Perhaps it was the sea or her depleted state from the hard voyage, or...never mind! The morning would come early. A little unsettling to have events rushing so headlong.

Once persuaded to it--and Laurie suspected she had an inexplicable ally in the rabbi's wife--Mr. Lillard seemed manically determined to be on his way. She stripped off her shawl, turned back the billowing covers and stepped into bed. They had all been kind but there had definitely been undercurrents around that dining room table, she thought, pulling the cover to her chin. Tommy had laughed inordinately long and loud when the rabbi had reminded him that while he could outfit the expedition from Gentile stores, he couldn't expect to be on the trail for another day if young Moishe was to go along. The Jewish boy could not travel on his Sabbath. She turned restlessly on her side, unsure if she welcomed the extra day's respite or dreaded not getting on with her venture--with unwanted time to ponder how she wanted to find her husband--the relief of a reunion or confirmation she was a widow. Rising on one elbow, she turned down the wick and settled for sleep.

* * *

The man generally known as Irish icily controlled the tic that marred his impossibly chiseled jaw. He'd grown heartily tired of that nickname which he suspected he shared with every other unwashed hulking miner, the very picture of a stupid plowman in workshirt rolled to expose winter underwear and red chapped arms, big, clumsy boots two sizes larger than normal, with a coating of the ever-present gumbo. That or the dust, he amended, sourly mopping at his neck and cheek with a bandana.

The burly man who'd hailed him had been the carter who'd given him a ride from Bitter Spring. The man called Irish had been an affable companion on the long run, his charm making up for his being unable to help with the mules. But he no longer had need of the carter whom he'd found stupid and brutish. Still, it was politic not to put down the oaf.

Here he stood in conversation with the assayist who knew the rest of his name. He preferred not to have the carter remember him--and more importantly, that he'd carried his passenger from Bitter Spring--longer than necessary. He offered the passing carter a vague smile and perfunctory wave, glad to have gotten off as easily as standing a drink. Blast the fellow! He'd thought he'd slid out of the tent casino deftly enough, but, apparently, he was doomed to keep coming across the man in the settlement. Best to get his ore translated into tender, buy that horse and move on quickly.

He favored the assayist with a patient smile and prodded the leather poke between them meaningfully. "Ah, Mr. Heston, yes, could you hurry it a little?" He quelled his cold temper and made his shrug apologetic. "I've really got my eye on this nice piece of horseflesh. Her owner will take business but I've a rival, and, well, you understand I'm not anxious to lose this bay for lack of funds."

The assayist replaced the remainder of the unused sample back in the poke without bothering to reply. He swept away from the counter, did arcane things in front of a safe with his back blocking the view from the counter, and presently returned just as silently with gold this time in the form of limp paper bills. He counted them laboriously, wetting his thumb to his tongue often, while the Irishman fumed and drummed his fingers. As the man methodically finished and lifted an impassive face to give him the google-eyed gaze of a fish through his beer mug-thick glasses, the Irishman all but snatched the bills.

Careful, careful. If he's immune to your smile, maybe he's just as dense in other ways. Don't give him a moment's reason to remember you. The fine nostrils flared on a frustrated intake of breath. He *hated* this running and hiding, always looking over his shoulder, and it was all because he knew with utter, chilling certainty that the man who owned a half-share of the poke he'd just converted to cash was not dead. God above! He *should* have been. That scruffy cowboy had more lives than the proverbial cat. He'd been unsure if his rifle shot had taken down only the man's horse or he'd scored on his real target. He had not yet become proficient in firearms and his vantage up the trail from their placer claim, while concealed, left him among tall pines whose mutable shadows striped the trail. At the very least, the tumbling, involved bodies of horse and rider should have been broken for the crows by that slide the plunging animal took down the embankment.

He'd risen and stood still as the dust settled, but not in remorse. He was touched by no enormity. It had been a partnership of convenience; neither man had particularly liked or trusted the other. But the claim had been rich enough to enforce their truce. The evening it had been his turn at the sluice while his partner slept exhausted from too many hours awake and wary, he'd realized the color had run out. He'd stood in the twilight and leaned on his shovel considering his options. There was a fair poke--nothing grand but substantial--for one man. The man even his partner called Irish, lefted, then abandoned the shovel. He'd never killed a man before. Almost without conscious decision, he carefully skirted his sleeping partner's bedroll, pried up the loose board of the flooring they'd scrounged for their tent, and escaped.

Deliberately, he'd left horse and gun for the man who would pursue as soon as he awoke. *He'd kill me,* the Irishman reasoned as he made himself comfortable in the rocks above the trail, *I have to defend myself*. All had almost gone according to plan, and he'd stood listening to the crash of broken bushes subside and felt, not remorse, but a rush of his characteristic ironic amusement. It rather tickled his fancy that he knew his erstwhile partner had been a notorious bandit. How very poetic, after all. He touched his hat in mock salute to the settling dust on the rim, turned to shove his rifle into its boot, and grabbed his reins.

The fellow had not killed after all, it seemed... As he recalled his momentarily almost superstitious panic when he'd seen the man brought in alive to the doctor, he blinked. The assayist was looking at him expectantly. He thrust the roll of bills into his breast pocket and reached the door in two long-legged strides. He had scant fear the outlaw would be in a position to raise a hue and cry. But he realized he had a dangerous enemy to spur him. He paused with his hand on the latch, aware that the assayist was still watching.

"Well," he flashed an insincerely hearty grin, "guess I'll see if I can still buy that sweet little filly." He hung on his heel before passing out the door. "Think I'll try my luck south on the San Joaquin." Just in case this fool remembered him, that should throw his nemesis off the track, especially since a move out of the north would be only logical. Then he could go to cover for a while near Bidwell's Bar on the branch of the North Fork and Feather River.

As he began to swing the door to behind him, the clerk pushed the thick lenses up his nose, gave him a watery smile at last and said with dreadful clarity, "Good luck, Mr. Sullivan." He could not have heard the muffled curse as Irish Kevin Sullivan plunged off the boardwalk and cannoned into a passing shoulder hard enough for both to grunt. In the same instant, he identified his fellow pedestrian as an anonymous Chinese in faded coolie blue; he put all his frustrated venom into another shove. The smaller man landed on his rear in what passed for a street in this spring season, a mushy quagmire. Sullivan did not look back.

* * *

Tommy Lillard leaned back from wrestling the barrel of salt pork and let Moishe finish relashing it in place. He gave a theatrically martyred sigh as he licked skinned knuckles. He shook his head as the young Jew looked up anxiously, "'S okay, kid. I checked those lashings myself before we struck into the current. Things get wet," he paused to ruefully drag his sleeve over his face, "even rope. Don't worry. This time you followed orders just fine."

Moishe straightened to near Tommy's own six-feet height. "I'm glad, Tommy." The slight voice skated down the scale and cracked on the syllables of Tommy's name. Moishe reddened, coughed briefly and tried again. "I'm older, you see, not the clumsy child who wanted to help you build cousin Rosalie's chicken coop."

From first meeting, Tommy had looked on Moishe Bender and been irresistably reminded of a gosling, fragile and awkward, all long white neck and big hands and feet; all except the eyes. Magnified brown behind their wire-rimmed lenses, they had held him with their unpleading vulnerability. For all they were deep brown rather than blue, they were Avram's eyes piercing over a makeshift spear in futile pursuit of a particularly wiley trout. Did reading this Torah stuff make everyone look like that? Still, in a year and a half, the kid had shot up, fulfilling the promise of those big hands and feet, and though still round-shouldered and thin-barrelled, no longer quite looked as if he had whey instead of blood in his veins.

Tommy mopped his face again and was glad he'd curbed his earlier exasperation. Moishe had *meant* well--he always meant well--and he *had* finally figured his way through the knots. Tommy was also glad he'd made the boy do it the three times it took to finish without a mistake. Now he could honestly reassure him it wasn't his fault.

His rotten mood wasn't even Laurie Sullivan's fault, he admitted as he braced against the sway as the big raft heeled into a dip between two boulders. As timber jarred and groaned, Tommy shouted, "Moishe! Grab a pole!" He copied the move himself and giving the boy an imperative shove toward the other corner, he joined the straining rivermen, thrusting at one of the glistening black shoulders fraying bark on the portside of the raft.

The raft shuddered along the obstruction, eased only by pushing muscle, lurched like a stiffed-legged bronc' and splatted pancake into a lower, calmer eddy. The jolt took even the raft crew's balance, several actually fell, and a child squealed. Tommy, who didn't have sea legs, and was wearing high-heeled cowboy boots rather than miner's flat nobnails, felt his feet roll across the logs like a washboard and he sat abruptly. His language was vividly fluent for a full minute as he rubbed his backside and wiped his wet face again. Moishe reached for his elbow but Tommy shrugged and rolled to his knees unaided. "Never mind, kid, I think we're through the worst of it. Better check on Miz Sullivan."

In misery, Laurie watched Moishe approach and tried to make herself loosen her deathgrip on the handful of canvas on each side of her. She succeeded in releasing one hand which she used to pry open her other fingers. She'd just dropped them shaking into her lap when the wagon rocked slightly under Moishe's weight as he pulled himself up on the mud guard to peer at her. "Mrs. Sullivan? How are you?"

Her voice resembled Moishe's at the moment it had cracked and she had to try again to enunciate, "Fine!"

Moishe grinned in conspiratal sympathy and added, "Tommy says we're through the worst of it. It's clear water till we offload."

"Thanks, Moishe." The hushed response was heartfelt. As Moishe returned to Tommy across the raft, Laurie surreptiously smoothed her rucked skirt. The garment was makeshift and uncomfortably unfamiliar, the thick folds of heavy woven linen, wet, almost unmanageable around her ankles, and her shirtwaist blouse kept untucking from her trim waist. But it better suited her circumstances in a hurry than the nearest thing her wardrobe had yielded--an elegant country suit that she'd worn those few turns in the park when she and Kevin had still been courting. She was regretful. The suit was almost new, there'd been scant enough occasion to wear it since her marriage.

She tucked the blouse back into her waistband for the twentieth time that morning, and avoided what she considered the censuring mein of the few poke-bonnetted women in their limp faded pink or dun calico. *I can't help it that you're so brave and hardy,* she told them silently. *I can't help that I never learned to swim.*

But whether they really accused or not, she was bitterly aware of being very excess baggage. It was still hours till the raft would put in to shore. She could at least set the wagon to rights. She carefully pivotted in the seat until she faced the canvas-covered boot, gingerly swung a leg over and lowered herself into the shadowed interior. Mess was a kind understatement for the jumbled gear she found from the rattling the wagon had endured. She wrinkled her nose as her fingers encountered a soggy wad of cheese cloth. Upon peeling it, she discovered an unappetizing squashy lump that gave off a strongly yeasty odor. Whatever this stuff had been, it was no good to anyone now. She knew what to do with this, at least. She cocked an arm, pitched, and bent to the remaining debris without bothering to watch the splash.

* * *

"You threw out *what*?!" Tommy seemed to be courting apoplexy. He visibly counted to ten and tried again. "That was the starter, Miz Sullivan, you know? Biscuits? Bread?"

Laurie practically heard him vibrate with heroically contained outrage. She closed her eyes and wished fleetingly she had drowned.

"Didn't your mother never teach you nothin' about *bakin'*?"

Laurie wavered between guilt and defiance and settled for hauteur. "We had kitchen servants." She caught the flame in his eye and the belligerant jut of chin and her act faltered. "I'm sorry, Tommy. My mother died when I was three, and none of the governesses wanted me in the kitchen where I'd get dirty." She ducked her head then met his suddenly uncomfortable stare with a suspiciously bright one of her own. "I sew well, though." Interminable hours for a ten-year-old in the upstairs parlor diligent over yet another intricate sampler with only the ticking mantle clock for company had assured that skill at least.

Tommy glanced away to squint across the dazzling water, cleared his throat. Still sternly but at a much softer volume, he resumed still studying the expanse to the shoreline. "Hmmm, well, mebbe we can trade for a pinch in the camps. It's just that it's a son of a bi--ah, lotta work to make fresh, and we don't even have the makings, ya see."

"I'm sorry, Tommy," she repeated contritely. "I'll ask in the future. I really will. I just wanted...oh, just to pull my weight."

He turned his head and she saw the storm clouds had vanished. "Nah," he drawled teasingly, "in the future, I'm gonna show ya how to *use* the stuff for the best biscuits north of the San Joaquin and south of the Rockies."

He lifted her as easily under the arms as a kitten to swing her ashore. As her feet left the planking, she heard him mutter. "I can guess about yer ma. My daddy died the day 'fore I was born. Battle of New Orleans." The way he pronounced the name deepened a hint of South in his accent.

Startled by his spontaneous revelation, she seized on something idiotically safe. "Why, you sounded Southern just then."

His grin as he set her on the bank was affable. "Georgia. An' with two older brothers and a sister in the fields all day, you can bet I learned to make biscuits soon's I could crawl on a stool." He winked and finished shamelessly, "You couldn't learn from none better." He broke the moment lightly by making cheerfully heavy work of splashing ashore.

* * *

Laurie clung grimly to the ribbons and tried to ignore the groan of the tortured wheels. She dared not spare a glance for Tommy and Moishe; the heavier man struggling to hold Invictus' bridle, the boy springing about to ease the log chocks on the wheels. "Yer too little to hold this mule, an' I ain't lettin' ya handle them logs. Ya slip in that loose dirt an' ya go under the wheels. Wagon seat's best place fer ya."

Laurie had peered horrified at the steep downgrade, result of a washout on the trail. "But I can't *drive*. You haven't taught me!"

"Don't need to. Jus' hold the ribbons so." His big hands expertly settled them in hers. "Keep 'em from tanglin'."

"I don't know how to keep the mules straight, Mr. Lillard."

"I'll be doin' that up front. Ya jus' set and keep them ribbons tight." He'd patted the near mule, Gertie, and thrown her an encouraging smile. "Got to do it thisa way, Miz Sullivan. Can't back mules down--won't go--gotta be turned."

Now she swallowed her heart back where it belonged and ignored the burning pain in her clenched hands. A jangle of trace chains as Invictus tossed his head was answered by Tommy's curses as he dragged the animal's head down again. "Watch yer toes!" This, sharply to Moishe.

Then, quite suddenly, they were past the grade, and Tommy was digging in his bootheels and calling to her. "Pull up on 'em now, Miz Sullivan." She bit her lip and pulled hard.

She sat numbly, afraid to move while Tommy made a quick inspection of the harness and wagon. He clapped Moishe on the back, and the young Jew's somber eyes lighted. Leaving him to mop his dirty, streaming face, Tommy climbed onto the seat and retrieved the reins, looping them over the brake. He pulled her bleeding hands into his lap to examine them. Silently, he hauled out and shredded the extra bandana, then reached for his makings. She flinched as he spat into a small palmful of tobacco and worked it into a poultice. Gently, he spread the mass on her raw hands and bound them with the strips, only remarking quietly, "Tobacco'll take the fire out." Finished, he asked, "Want to lay down in the boot fer a while?"

Laurie stopped examining his neat bandaging and tossed the hair from her eyes. "I was sitting down. Perhaps Moishe would derive more benefit from the rest...and you could teach me to drive, Tommy."

Tommy regarded her for a long moment, then called without turning around. "Hey, Moishe, climb up back fer a while." Then he reached to gather the reins with a mutter. "Stubborn as Avram." Then lower still, "*He's* pretty gutsy, too."

She looked at him. Had she heard correctly?

"Now, pay 'tention, Laurie." He held up his laced hands. "Ya hold 'em so, each separate, see? Now, this 'un goes down through that ring and guides Truman there. He's yer right wheel animal. It's a six hitch 'cause it's six mules, each with its own reins..."

Moishe rolled onto his side and punched up the small sack. He was not much better at quandries than Tommy. He wasn't used to them in a life well and serenely ordered by Talmud--serenely ordered until cousin Rosalie had drawn him temporarily apart from the turbulence of packing. The short conversation they'd exchanged had left him secretly burdened with an obligation--and the quandry stemming from it. Which was he--a *yenta* or a chaperone? Matchmaking wasn't a man's occupation anyway. Besides, Mrs. Sullivan was a married woman; wasn't the whole point of her trip to find the lost husband?

Moishe scratched his head and half-concluded Moma was right. His father's nieces were being raised to the strangest notions. There was Sarah Mindle running off with Julius instead of marrying the rabbi like a proper firstborn, and Rosalie more than half-choosing the rabbi herself--as any had an eye to see. Now he'd been set to chaperone a rambunctious cowboy and an Eastern lady who might be married--though he could guess cousin Rosalie wouldn't be too upset to discover her a widow--both Gentiles, and he couldn't recall a thing in the Talmud to cover the situation.

He surreptitiously lifted his head far enough to steal a peek at the teamster and her instructor unconsciously leaning close on the seat above him. He flopped into a more comfortable position, and sighed around the filthy finger he dragged under his itching nose. It left a dusty gray moustache. He swiped irritably at another tackling bead of sweat traveling down a peachfuzz cheek. It'll be all right, he assured himself. They were Gentile and rules were different for them. *It would be all right*...but somehow he doubted it.

* * *

In spite of her best efforts, Laurie couldn't ignore the pair. She tried to look gainfully employed by tugging a flour sack toward the tent saloon but Tommy stepped in and handily appropriated her load in his hurry to unload. The deal had been a while concluding--Laurie had been torn between embarrassment and admiration at Tommy's shameless aplomb--now the unloading of the sold goods proceeded under the glare of torchlight. Unintentionally shouldered out of the way of the heavy lifting and stowing, she shrank inward from the din--horses, dogs, profanity, shouts, the electric confusion that greeted a real hauler with news and supplies rather than a drifter passing to another camp. How many times had this carnival occurred since they'd begun? Often enough for her to have found her feet and long since grown less "rabbity" as Tommy put it.

Ah, but she knew what was wrong, and it wasn't the boisterous press of miners around the wagon. Unwillingly, her gaze was drawn back to the edge of the crowd.

The pair was still there--the boney-faced woman with the staring eyes, one hand bunching a shawl over a shapeless dress so repeatedly washed, the faded print was only fly specks; the other hand clutching the chicken-claw hand of a small girl with an equally disturbing deathshead stare. Lank-haired, tow-headed to whiteness, with the layer of dirt livid on top of chalky skin, she was an unappetizing little grub at best, but beside her grayly two-dimensional mother, she seemed incandescent, like some unholy lantern.

Laurie gave up and squelched toward them through the mud, hugging her own shawl tighter. Automatically, the woman piped in a reedy voice, "No money, no money." The accent was thick. Just how much English did the woman have? Laurie cast around helplessly and located Tommy over her shoulder. Together with Moishe he was wrestling that benighted barrel of salt pork. Abruptly, Laurie swung around and plowed straight to the wagon. She rescued a flour sack and quickly filled it with whatever her hands touched--two cans of beans, a small bag of coffee, a slab of bacon, a little tin of captain's biscuits. She hided the knobby load awkwardly over her shoulder, and almost sank to the ankles in the mud as she retraced her way to the woman and child. She thrust it stiffly at them.

"No money."

Laurie nodded. "For the child." For an anxious breath, there was no response, then jerkily as a puppet the woman released child and shawl to reach for the sack. Her glassy expression remained unchanged as she stood woodenly in the mud clutching the sack as if not quite sure what to do with it. The child merely stood quiescent. Laurie looked at them a long moment before she turned her back to trudge to the wagon.

"Right kind of ya," a familiar voice drawled quietly. She raised her head to discover Tommy draped against the near wagon wheel, his elbow on it, supported fist propping chin.

Aware of her own conventional guilt, she started to depreciate the gesture, when Tommy uncoiled like a striking predator. She jumped and had a fleeting glimpse of a goggle-eyed Moishe trying to hide behind the ledger. "Ya ain't a charitable institooshon, ya know. That sack o' supplies had to be trucked up here by mules which gotta eat, too. It ain't bad enough we only jus' got rid of that damn monster barrel you figgered we jus' hadda lug up here..." Laurie had backed a pace, unused to such direct squalls; Kevin had been more convoluted in his punishments. "...we only got one wagon, I said, can't compete with the big freight outfits. Let *them* haul the port, we stick to the small, light luxury stuff. I figured you'd get pins and pretties, but no..."

Head ducked into the storm, Laurie hugged her shawl and lurched back another step, sliding desperate glances from side to side. She'd learned to make fists and stand silently to get through her fastidious flayings at home...as well as the one time she'd committed the mistake of paying a surprise visit to Kevin at work. She bled from a thousand invisible flicks of the scalpel, her pride leeched away, but she did not have the wit to defend from the delicate ironies in the same coin.

Silence didn't help with Tommy--he simply went on yelling. *Please, not here in front of all these people, not you, too...* Miserably, she looked up as far as the uncompromising mouth and ventured faintly, "I thought food would be best. Avram kept saying that eggs cost such an incredible price..."

The mouth twisted. "Avram don't know ever'thin'." Tommy was blunt. "He's a good man--the best, but he ain't a storekeeper like Sam Bender--an' if there was anyone born impractical, it was Avram!"

Appalled, for she'd sensed a deep bond between him and the rabbi, Laurie was startled into meeting Lillard's eyes. They were slate dark and full of a curiously angry pain.

The sight rocked her and she merely stood open-mouthed, subliminally aware in her peripheral vision that they were quite alone with only a cowering Moishe. No audience attended her humiliation, and she heard the jovial sounds of bustle and clinking glass and laughter from the tent city as the supplied were absorbed. She and Tommy made an isolated little island of pain and grief, shame and inexplicable anger.

He broke the tableau more quietly. "Ya can't give it *all* away. Yer gonna find cases like that in all the camps. Ya can bet nobody'd feed *you* once ya gave it all away an' was starvin'. I *tole* ya the camps was no place fer ya." A near whisper. "Ner them neither. Ahh, what're we doin' standin' here jawing. Look, jus' don't do it no more, all right?"

He turned away, not waiting for her response and snatched the ledger from Moishe. The boy flinched but then still stood in his rolled shirtsleeves, a bewildered and ungainly young stork with grave dark eyes. Tommy's stormy regard slid away, not to Laurie, but to the empty corner by the saloon. "Just get outta the way, Moishe. Go get in the wagon while I settle up inside." He looked at the ledger as if he had no idea how it got in his hands, shoved it at Moishe and stomped into the saloon.

Moishe transferred the book from hand to hand and his weight from foot to foot. He didn't look at Laurie but sneaked sidelong peeks. He cleared his throat. "Mrs. Sullivan, um, I'm sorry. I don't know what..."

"It's all right, Moishe. I do. Some things only appear to be different at first glance. Underneath, there's no difference at all." Weary bitterness colored her tone.

The young Jew looked at her curiously. She gestured vaguely at the ledger and moved tiredly to the wagon. "Let's get aboard. He'll be out in a moment; let's not give him any more excuses." She accepted the boy's hand up to the seat and stepped through to the interior. "I think I'll just travel in the back, Moishe." Her smile for the boy was faint as he followed her up to the seat. "I don't know about you but I'll be *very* glad to leave here...and camp for the night."

Scant time later, Tommy ducked through the flap of canvas that served for a door. He came around to the right and began to climb up. "You drive, kid. I want to record this stuff." He hung the lantern on the peg above his head and took the ledger in his lap. He had not spoken to Laurie, nor she to him, but the short trip to a likely spot by the creek was by no means silent--punctuated steadily by Tommy's colorful monologue directed at the ledger while he figured and scratched and thumbed back and forth. He heaved a sigh and seemed grateful to abandon the ledger on the seat as he jumped down and began to help set up camp.

Supper was a silent meal that evening. Laurie had the satisfaction of seeing her fledgling biscuits disappear nonetheless. She half hoped Tommy would say something about them, but he was staring moodily into the fire, both hands nursing his tin cup. The twin flames reflected in his hooded gaze vanished when he looked up to see Moishe proferring the coffeepot.

"Yeah, thanks, Moishe." Laurie was astonished at the mildness of his tone. His smile was even apologetic. Fortunate Moishe. But then he had not been the one to raise Lillard's ire. "Bring me the ledger, will ya, kid?"

Laurie swirled her own fresh coffee in her cup and spoke without looking at Tommy. "Do you really get used to it?" The silence was so profound she looked up. He was setting the book on his knee as yet unopened. She waited a moment later and when he failed to respond, she could not keep from bursting out in a husky undertone, "Tommy, Mr. Lillard, you told me you still had a mother, a sister; sure..."

"Don't!"

"What?"

"I don't no more. Diptheria. Used to send money back fer awhile. Went home once. At the big house where she worked, they said it took 'em both."

"I'm...sorry."

"Got a brother run off to sea. Mebbe *he's* still alive. Went fer a whaler so it's hard to say. Joel's dead, though...he tried soldierin'. Anything to get off that damn...uh...farm."

She sat up straighter. "You mean you just left her and your sister on that farm and...?"

"I *tole* ya--they worked at the big house. We stayed while she did the laundry. Rob stayed on the farm till he went to sea." He ended the confidence by opening the ledger and burying his nose in it. She finished her coffee and listened to his grumpy progress.

She'd had an oddly fine head for numbers in childhood. She'd accidentally surprised one governess who'd had a discreet romance with the neighbor boy's tutor. When her normally biddable charge had rebelled over one too many samplers, the governess had discovered that mathematics lessons from her next door suitor made an excellent bribe.

Of course, she'd not learned anything so arcane as bookkeeping. How ironic, considering Kevin's creative artistry. For that, she'd had a thorough crash course from Sullivan, McCrory and Fitch's lawyer--tight-lipped and sarcastic when he'd met with her quietly firm refusal to be set aside in genteel ignorance at the height of the furor. It had been grueling and humiliating, nearly a personal attack, but she had learned.

Well, perhaps it was from that ordeal her dormant spirit had begun to flex its wings. The woman who'd huddled, clutching the edge of the bureau, with her eyes so lost and hurt, following Kevin back and forth on his numerous impatient trips to the open portmanteau on the bed, had even roused a stab of pity from Kevin. He paused, framed by the stained glass in the vestibule, the clearly defined features softening infinitesimally, the fine contempt for once uncurled from the carved lips. She'd jumped when he'd cupped her chin. "Believe if you can, my dear, I *am* sorry. Perhaps..." He traced her upturned cheek with a finger. "Such a compliant little mouse, so much younger than your years--are you really almost twenty-seven?" The startling kiss he'd planted on her lips had been actually tender. "A man can make a fortune in the gold fields--or re-make one. Goodbye, sweet, we may meet again under happier circumstances."

Laurie lifted her chin quietly and repeated, "I believe I *can* manage the books, Mr. Lillard. Like sewing, it's one of my skills and probably more readily useful just now." She caught the sulky lower lip that appeared whenever she icily reverted to his surname. Some irritated perversity of her own made her push it. "It's only fair I carry the main responsibility of recording. I *did* buy the goods."

The soft, sulky lip disappeared into a thinly bitter line. "Well, that's just fine, Miz Sullivan. Here--you do just that!" He erupted from his crouch as if his legs were springs and thrust the heavy ledger into her arms brusquely enough to make her bend at the waist.

Cheeks flaming, she recovered herself; long submerged Irish temper flaring, she sank in a prim arrangement of skirts onto the convenient log and took the defiantly offered pen. Out of the corner of her eye, she was aware of his crossed-arm stance above her. As she neatly struck entry after entry, substituting correct figures in proper columns, systematically and without fuss ordering the chaos he'd been so profanely struggling with, she saw his face twist outrageously.

"Yeah, okay, good enough. Reckon I can just leave that little chore in your hands from now on while I tend to more important things!" His reaction was explosive and there was as much fire in his cheeks as his slitted eyes as he strode off. She heard him pause, deliberately not snap at Moishe's question, and quietly respond that he was going to tend the mules.

Laurie discovered the hand holding the pen was shaking and she hastily placed the implement in the crease of the binding and massaged her fingers, twisting the wedding band she still wore over and over. She wished herself home and then tried to picture it: The rich furnishings of her sister's house with the stuffy back bedroom opening off the servants' stairs and across the hall from the dumb-waiter? Her own and Kevin's, alien and empty at the auction with sheets over the sofas and strangers examining her grandmother's candlesticks? Or perhaps her fathers? She had no home. There was only Kevin.

Lying sleepless in her bedroll by the fire, Laurie tensed as she heard Tommy restlessly turn over in his own. After some time, he sifted again and she heard a weary sigh. It was a long time before his rumbling snore joined Moishe's fluting whiffle. Soon after, Laurie drifted off herself.

* * *

Though she winced from the harsh-timbred undertone, Laurie forced herself to be attentive. The alien black eyes that penetrated her composure were unwinking and impenetrable as an insect's and seemingly as pitiless. The description was all too exact. Kevin had been this way, and within the month. Though she alone had known the hollow charm of Kevin's previous reputation, it had been a scourging experience to hear truth angrily confirmed in every mouth after the collapse became public--no little because she was the only one left to face it. "Yeah, Missy, but this one does not think the tall Irishman is still there. He declared to all who would hear that he would purchase a horse and travel south.

"Yes, yes, the face carved fine and colored as ivory is, nose is straight and teeth wondrous white. His eyes are dark blue. His hat was pushed back and the hair very black, had a lock to fall just so." The speaker demonstrated with a finger to his own forehead.

Laurie recognized the patrician features of her husband and lowered her head slowly. "Yes," she whispered. "That's Kevin. You...you seemed to have observed him in minute detail for so short an encounter, Mr. ..."

"Chou, madame. And I had excellent vantage--and reason to do so." The Chinese's precise English became fleetingly tart, and some strong emotion gleamed in the dark eyes. One hand slid out of sight into his other sleeve. "This man is your husband."

Her shame naked, Laurie's reply was reluctant. "Yes."

Sensing other eyes, she glanced over the little Chinese's head and felt her heart stand still. Hard-faced and narrow-eyed, Tommy Lillard stood on the higher step on the boardwalk. One hand was supported on the railing; the other hooked back his duster to rest on his hip, revealing the low-tied revolver. He might have just arrived or been standing there forever.

The Chinese glanced around and removed his hand from his sleeve. Lillard transferred his odd, silent ferocity from Laurie to the Chinese. "You understand, much of what I have said is hearsay. I myself saw him only the once... It was enough to make me inquire of the man afterward." The queue twitched as its owner glanced back and forth. Tommy had resumed his intent study of Laurie's face as if the small man had not been there.

A faint cough broke their communion. "From what I learned, it is possible your husband did not go south. Apparently, nothing was straightforward about him. Indeed, he was proven many times to be devious for its own sake and not for any benefit he would derive." If anything, Tommy's face grew stormier. The Chinese avoided his stare and met Laurie's. She at last could put a name to this last flicker of emotion: spite. He bobbed his head to them both and made to withdraw.

The jingle of a spur was loud as Tommy planted one foot the next step down, barring the way. "That's it? Gossip and guesses?"

The Chinese sidestepped. "You might learn more from the freight hauler who gave him a ride here. That one is not here now but you will come across him if you stay in the camps. He works for the Yellow Bolt line and he comes through frequently to all the larger camps. His name is Ludek. He has yellow hair."

Following the man's departure, Moishe's was the sudden inconsequential utterance that relieved the heavy pause. "Spurs, Tommy? You left your horse at the stable in Rabbi Belinsky's care."

Tommy seemed to wake. "Huh? Oh, yeah, Moishe. Crocker Morrison's got a fine remuda I remembered from when I was around here before. He let me try out a sweet little black mare of his while I waited for ya." He paused. "Seems yer husband bought a bay horse from him not a full month ago. I came lookin' to tell you. So,...where do we go from here, ma'am?"

Laurie gestured helplessly, glancing from Tommy to Moishe and back. "I don't know *what* to do, Tommy. I...the only real direction we have is south, even if it might be mistaken."

"Good a direction as any. We got a good four hour's daylight left. Let's head out. We can make Bitter Spring day after tomorrow and make a big loop back to Sacramento City."

He hesitated before he offered his arm to help her up the steep boardwalk that rambled through the seedy gulch. Moishe, bringing up the rear, sneezed violently as drifting garbage wafted a particularly acrid eddy from the evilly glinting ribbon of water winding below.

Tommy's laugh was distinctly unpleasant. "Don't let it get to ya, Moishe. By tomorrow morning, we'll be up there." His free hand gestured vaguely expansive at the high meadows that sloped away toward towering, snow-capped peaks.

Moishe's dismayed eyes measured the giants over the rim of his glasses and his mouth opened in a squeak. "All the way up *there*?"

Tommy looked down, aimiably reassuring. "Nah, just to the meadows, boy. But we're swingin' south an' to get to Bitter Spring, we gotta go up, 'fore we can go down."

Laurie had not spoken on all the climb and Tommy saw no reason to add he'd gone deliberately to Crocker Morrison with questions of his own--nor that Sullivan had cheated the man out of the bay horse.

* * *

Above the noisome gullies of the terraced camp, Tommy drew rein and set the brake. Moishe blinked at him, and Laurie thrust her tousled head out between them. Tommy was gazing about him with an expression translucent as water. He grinned at them and gestured one-handed. "Smell." Up on the ridge, the spring breeze was antic, causing a flurry amid the first dusting of wildflowers. It was also clean and faintly sweet with their odor.

Laurie held onto her disheveled bun and squinted past Tommy's pointing finger. "Oh! What is it?"

Sunlight danced across a gossamer mist in the lush new grass. "Spiders." Laurie's head swung around in shock and Moishe hastily pulled up his dangling long legs. But Tommy was relaxed. "Yep. Spiders. Come out after rain like this and string them itty bitty webs fer the insects that'll be stirrin'. They're there by the thousands, sparklin' away just like that, and then they're gone just as sudden, like dew. They're so tiny, ya don't hardly ever see 'em."

The breeze freshened and the mist rippled and winked. Some of the fluff tore away and drifted toward the wagon. Wonderingly, Laurie reached out and plucked it out of the air--spider silk four hundred feet up on a rain-washed sunny morning. She was suddenly keenly aware of Tommy watching her, and of that changeable blend of eye color that lent itself as a barometer of mood. At the moment, there were lambent as sunlight spangling green woods; something loosened in her chest and she laughed.

To Tommy, she looked, with the breeze loosening fine tendrils of her hair at temples and cheek, like and yet unlike his first real sight of her on the wharf in Frisco. When she laughed, at first almost in surprise and then with childlike joy, the differences were suddenly more important.

Head back and throat exposed in a long white line to the demure collar, she tossed the curls, reveling in the scene he had called her attention to; she seemed to fill with light like a lamp with a fresh-trimmed wick. He realized in the kingfisher flash of her gaiety, how rare it was. She'd smiled--wistfully, apprehensively, kindly, enigmatically, apologetically, and a thousand moods in between, captured in arrested splashes of campfire light or lantern glare framed in dim canvas interior--but never had he heard her laugh.

The unaccustomed sound in all its lilt made a tinny jangle of the incessant giggles of saloon whores drunk as he--or pretending to be--and blew them to the recesses of his mind. To recall she was another man's wife was an unexpectedly stabbing wrench. "We'd better quit lollygaggin' if we're gonna make the camp tonight." He was brusque as he released the brake.

It was a peculiar little pain to have her be in the act of glowingly turning toward him and to see her eyes cloud with confused hurt. He could not quite meet her toubled face and kept his own averted though he felt her staring at his profile for a long minute. He heard a faint sigh and she wilted back out of sight.

As if she'd spoken, he heard her instinctive flinch: *What did I do, Tommy? What did I say wrong...wrong...wrong...? Nothing!* His violent denial was no less savage for sounding only in his head. *You ain't done nothing wrong, sweetheart, 'cept fer marrin' a son-of-a-bitch I want to kill, not least of which for cowin' a...a...*lady *like you.* Even Moishe was subdued, peering at his scuffed boot tops as he swayed loose-boned at the jolts. Damn kid picked up on moods as bad as Avram.

* * *

Tommy prodded the stick into the center of the fire with a boot toe. As a little shower of sparks fountained into the night sky, his sigh was lost in the whooshing rush. He took another artfully unconcerned turn around the camp. He drifted closer to Laurie who was catching up with her posting by the lantern and half poking at the stew in her tin plate. Her concentration wavered as his shadow fell across the ledger and he caught the flicker of her eyes but she didn't look up, only pulled her shawl together more tightly. She had been nearly silent since morning and dinner had been a brooding affair.

The third time he tried to peer over her shoulder, she gave a little annoyed toss of head and one shoulder that switched her long braid across her back. "Mr. Lillard, I do assure you this is something I may be safely left to do competently."

Tommy backed up, hands still in pockets. "Oh, it ain't nuthin' like that, Miz Sullivan," he said hastily. He removed one hand to gesture. "Don't mind me none, jus' go on with yer figurin'. I'm just a mite restless." He wandered back to his own cooling supper, slid down the log that had been dragged up to the fire and picked up his plate again. He poked it half-heartedly with his fork before setting it aside. He cleared his throat. "Say, Moishe, I know what's eatin' at me."

The boy glanced up weak-eyed and blinking from trying to study his text by firelight. "Huh?"

"Yeah," Tommy went on, back studiously presented to Laurie. "Got my old-time feelin'. It's spring and cougars'll be moving down from the high country. They'll have new cubs and be comin' in real daring, looking to feed them. Best you might go check the mules...stay with 'em a little spell to get 'em calm." In fact, the only sounds from the mules all evening had been contented munching, the lazy swish of a tail. Nonetheless, Moishe got up obediently after tucking his precious book in his knapsack. "Wait, boy, take the rifle."

Tommy was well aware Moishe would trade looks and shrugs with Laurie as he went to get the weapon that leaned against the wagon wheel. The dark-garbed young Jew melted into the night. Tommy listened to his snapping, crackling progress through the twig-strewn path to the mules. Never make an Indian, that kid. He shook his head.

As the noises faded, he reached for the last biscuit in the pan. Even tonight, they had been popular. Laurie had initially set herself to learn for grim atonement and gradually delighted in her burgeoning skill. He remembered with a pang the five he'd downed three nights ago with not even a grunt of compliment. He'd clung to the black mood that had taken him ever since he'd shouted at Laurie earlier in the same evening. Shouted? He winced as he heard himself in memory. Squalled like an irate grizzley was more like it.

He'd risen from his gloom long enough to make peace with Moishe, but not with Laurie. He had not because it was a nasty lesson to learn--that life was often cruel and certainly unfair. And out here where she could not ring for a maid to bring more cake, learning that lesson quickly and well could mean life or death. He had not learned until their interview with the Chinaman that, in her husband, Laurie Sullivan had little more to learn about the cruelties of life.

Would it really have undermined his stance to have praised her biscuits? Tommy contemplated the last biscuit in his hand and almost put it back, appetite lost in a dry, aching throat. He mentally kicked his courage in the seat and spoke with studied nonchalance as he divided the biscuit. "Good thing Jeb ain't here. Or them biscuits of yours woulda just disappeared into thin air." He grinned around a bite and craned around hopefully.

"Jeb? Your partner?"

"Nah. Jeb was our slave back home, an'..."

"Slave?! You have slaves?"

Tommy seemed blithely unaware of her New England sensibilities as he reached for the other half of his biscuit. "Nope. Not 'slaves,' just Jeb. Lord," he paused to consider, thoughtfully scratching his stubbled beard. "Can't remember a time when Jeb hadn't been around. How he loved his biscuits." Still unconcerned and in a seemingly reminiscent mood, he swiped up the remnants of his stew. He paused with the biscuit half-way to his mouth and laughed--a startled glint in his eye. "Huh! Haven't thought of old Jeb since--well, years anyway. I musta been ten when he left."

"Escaped?" she asked in a low, quick whisper.

Tommy gave her a puzzled look as he licked his fingers. He set his tin plate aside, leaned back and crossed his legs, clasping his hands over his flat belly with a sigh. "Wouldn't rightly call it that. I recollect we was all havin' supper, and Jeb up an' says out of the blue he was goin' now. He wasn't on the porch when we came out in the morning so I guess he did. Never saw him again, anyhow."

Laurie shook her head impatiently, set her own plate down and hugged her knees as she studied his fire-lit profile. "But nobody tried to stop him?"

Tommy shrugged. "Didn't think about it. Hell--uh--heck, Jeb slept on the porch in summer and in the corner in winter, an' worked and ate like any of us--but he wasn't family, really. He wanted to go--so he went."

Laurie pressed it, not severely now but in confusion. "He...he was never whipped or...?"

Light dawned for Tommy. "Oh. You're one of them Abby-lishinists?"

She looked primly reproving. "I don't approve of slavery, no."

Tommy half sat up and returned the sharp look. "Approve what? Hell, no! I seen how it was around the big house. If I was a nigger, I'd run." He snorted his dudgeon that she'd harbor such low thoughts of him and resettled.

"Oh," was all Laurie could find to contribute. She stared into the flames and examined his remarks in the silence. At first appearance, they seemed a convenient quibble to still conscience. Yet he seemed genuinely to see no correlation between his family's slave and those whose plight aroused his ire. In truth, there were enough distinctions she half-sympathized with his disdain of Abolitionists.

Her own dilettante philanthropy was perhaps less honest. The image of the little backstairs maid prodded her complacence. There had been the parlor maid, the chambermaid...among a staff of six servants, four had been female...and with at least two, she had certain knowledge Kevin had been unfaithful. The gulping backstairs maid, teeth sunk in lower lip to keep back the tears, had not been one of them. In fact, Laurie was as certain Kevin was giving her notice for refusing as she knew the insolent-eyed chambermaid had not refused.

When she'd complained to Kevin of her inability to control the pretty maid, he'd agreed upon pondering that she needed more experience in exercising her authority. She would be 'allowed' to handle the packing of the backstairs maid for pilfering. Oh yes, pilfering. Everything had been abnormally loud to her raw senses that day. The click of the kitchen door as the girl had returned in her street clothes with the uniform on her arm--or perhaps it had only seemed loud in contrast to the shy country girl's silence as she draped the garment carefully over a bench, thin hand lingering to smooth the starched ruffle of the pinafore. *Pilfering.*

Turned off with a character, she'd never find another position. She could sell her body, starve, or go home to Brooklyn. Laurie shuddered to think of the reception she'd receive from hard-pressed family who'd hoped for her income. Well, she herself had been made to appreciate it intimately in her sister's house. A fleeting smile touched Laurie's lips. At least ten dollars had not gone into the housekeeping money, however. Sickened, goaded to defiance, she had stayed the hopeless girl in the kitchen door and pressed the bills into her hand. Laurie's impulsive hug had for an instant broken the maid's apathy. In a fierce whisper, "Go home, child. However bad it may be, go home. They are your family." Then she'd released her, watched her climb the area steps and disappear into the street.

Tommy followed her mesmerized gaze to the fire and wondered forlornly what in his cheerful prattle had spoiled his attempt to break the ice. Her eyes were haunted and he could guess the tenor her thoughts must have reverted to after the previous morning she'd had. His lips firmed grimly and Avram would have recognized with foreboding, the glint the firelight struck in the deep-set eyes.

"Say, Miz Sullivan? Laurie? 'Member when I asked ya back at the beginning 'bout Catholics?"

The seeming tangent rewarded him. She blinked and refocussed on him. "Um?"

"I jus' don't know a lot about 'em. I met these monks in this monestery once but I didn't learn so much cause they'd took this vow of silence and couldn't talk." *That* was true enough since he'd carried a sick Avram to their care after they'd left the Indians. He'd *told* Avram those peyote buttons weren't 'fruit'!

He had her attention now and enlarged on his roundabout theme. "I like to learn about stuff, y'see." He laughed self-consciously in spite of himself. "Got a mind like a crow. I see a bright sparkle an' I just dive for it. Wasn't much time for schoolin', what with gettin' corn in and choppin' cotton. I got through the Blue McGuffy all right--kin read and write fine and cypher..."

He looked guiltily aside and skipped to a safer topic. "Say, did ya know the Jewish Bible's like the reg'lar one--first part anyway. Avram called it the Torah. He started readin' a bit of it while we waited out a rain soon after we met up, and I told him it sounded jus' like Genesis. He said it was--an' goes all the way to Joshua."

"You aren't Jewish then, Tommy?"

"Ha! Ha! No. Avram's tryin' to convert me all right but he ain't tried to make me no Jew yet. He says one job at a time..."

"Pardon?"

"No way. I ain't ready to turn Jew. They gotta right chancey initiation fer a man, though they usually do it real young. Um...well, never mind about that," Tommy trailed off lamely. He rallied and plowed on to the difficult part.

He feared it would hurt her, but perhaps talking of it would pull the thorn from the wound...and he had reasons of his own for wanting some answers. "But they're interestin' folks--real interestin' weddings. Did you know I was Avram's Best Man?"

She looked startled, reassessing. "Really, Tommy?"

"Uh huh. So forgive me, I don't mean to be pryin'. But I'm curious how things go with Catholics." As she started to stiffen, he hurried on. "Like, you know Jews don't hold much with marryin' someone who ain't a Jew, and they're pretty dim on gettin' divorces and such. You near about gotta be a widow or somethin'."

Her face had closed up like stone. "For Catholics, too, Tommy," she replied softly.

He took a deep breath and threw the dice. "Is that why yer so set on findin' yer husband, ma'am? 'Cause ya can't get on with livin' till ya know for sure?"

For a moment he thought she would not answer. Then she bit her lip and it was he who looked away from the pain in her naked candor as the stone cracked. "Mr. Lillard, Tommy, you can't fail to know by now what kind of man my husband is. I'm not proud of it...and I'm not so proud of me for coming after him anymore.

I'd hoped...but maybe the Chinese was wrong; he'd had some scene with Kevin. Not the most reliable to learn about a man's character from his enemies."

He almost told her then but her eyes were so darkly pleading, he let his breath out in a deep sigh and was surprised to find he'd been holding it--achingly. He was left with a sick emptiness inside.

She was still speaking, entreating his understanding. "No matter what, even if he hasn't changed...he's my husband and I owe it to hear it from him."

"I'm sorry," he said softly, meaning it. He held her eyes until she dropped them uncomfortably to her lap.

Having forced the conversation, he seized a possible change of topic with relief. "Uh, you're real good with that ledger there. I never meanta yell at ya about takin' it on. It's kind of you to sort it out." He'd risen from the fire to stroll over beside her. He scratched the scar on his chin sheepishly. "I said I could cypher, but this kind of fancy stuff's sort of beyond me."

"Would you like me to teach you, Tommy?" she ventured.

"Oh, yeah, hey, would ya? I like findin' out how stuff works an' all." He laughed. "After I find a claim and hit it rich, Avram's bound to get me into business in Frisco so I'll need to know things like that." By mutual consent, they escaped to safer territory.

She made a place for him beside her under the lamp and he pulled of his shadowing stetson. She turned back a page. "You do the mathematics very well, Tommy; you're just getting confused over debits and credits. Let's just leave that for a bit. You don't really need to know theory to use them to balance. We can come back to it when you have practice just going through the steps."

Laurie found her attention rapt by the way the dark bronze hair curled behind his ears. "Oh, uh, just remember what you do in one column, you have to do the opposite with the same amount in this column..." *Stop it, stop it. It's not right. Stopitstopitstopit.*

"Tommy, I think the mules are safe now. May I go to bed?"

Laurie jerked her head away as Tommy turned to Moishe. His voice sounded nearly normal as he agreed and bid the boy goodnight.

Laurie raised her palms to conceal her flaming cheeks and her own voice seemed drowned to her. "Tommy, I'm really tired myself. And tomorrow's an early start. Let's start fresh tomorrow evening. We'll be staying at Bitter Spring and the light will be better, too." After a hesitation, Tommy nodded, rose and offered her a hand up. She placed the ledger in the wagon and almost fled to her bedroll.

* * *

The casually but duly elected law of Bitter Spring proved to be Sheriff Joe Hill of the baroque moustache, an acquaintance of several months from Tommy's previous foray into the gold fields. He looked up from his chat with a large blond man whose eagle profile was marred by a nose which took a more radical detour than the slightly rakish skew of Tommy's own.

"Tommy! Back to try your luck so soon? I'd have figured you to be laid up longer from what I heard. Glad you got such a hard head, boy."

Tommy looked uncomfortable and dodged the opening. "Oh, yeah, I'm escorting the lady here." Hill took first notice of Laurie and his mournfully noble eyes lit. He slicked his winglike lip adornment gallantly, and touched two fingers to his hat brim. He moistened his lips expectantly and waited for Tommy, who ended the introduction by producing a small parcel from his vest pocket. "Hey, almost forgot. Fella in Sacramento City found out I knew you an' would be heading this way. So he gave me this for ya."

"What is it?"

Tommy shot Laurie a shrewd grin and said distinctly, "Your new store teeth."

Hill groaned but still eagerly ripped into the package as he gave Tommy a gimlet glance that made him look more than ever like an elegant, blooded, red-bone hound. With a triumphant cry, he fished the plates from the packing, admired them and then made a comical grimace that included his blond companion and popped them in. He just as quickly yanked them out and stood regarding them balefully in an outstretched palm. "Wouldn't you know? A month's wait an' the dang things don't fit."

The bond man spoke up jovially in thickly accented English. "Sheriff Joe, you got to break them in like a pair of boots. Come, put them in and be a man."

Hill regarded him sourly with the priviledged jaundice of long friendship. "Easy for you, Pavel. Mark my words, you'll be gumming your beefsteak by the time you're forty if you don't go easy on that sweet tooth of yours." The big man threw back his head in a guffaw and Laurie saw, indeed, that one cheek bulged with horehound candy.

Beside her, Tommy stirred. "Say, where'd you get that stuff?"

The big man appriased Tommy. "Sacramento City."

"Damn--um, pardon, Laurie."

"Laurie?" Hill looked hopeful again but Tommy's attention was on the blond.

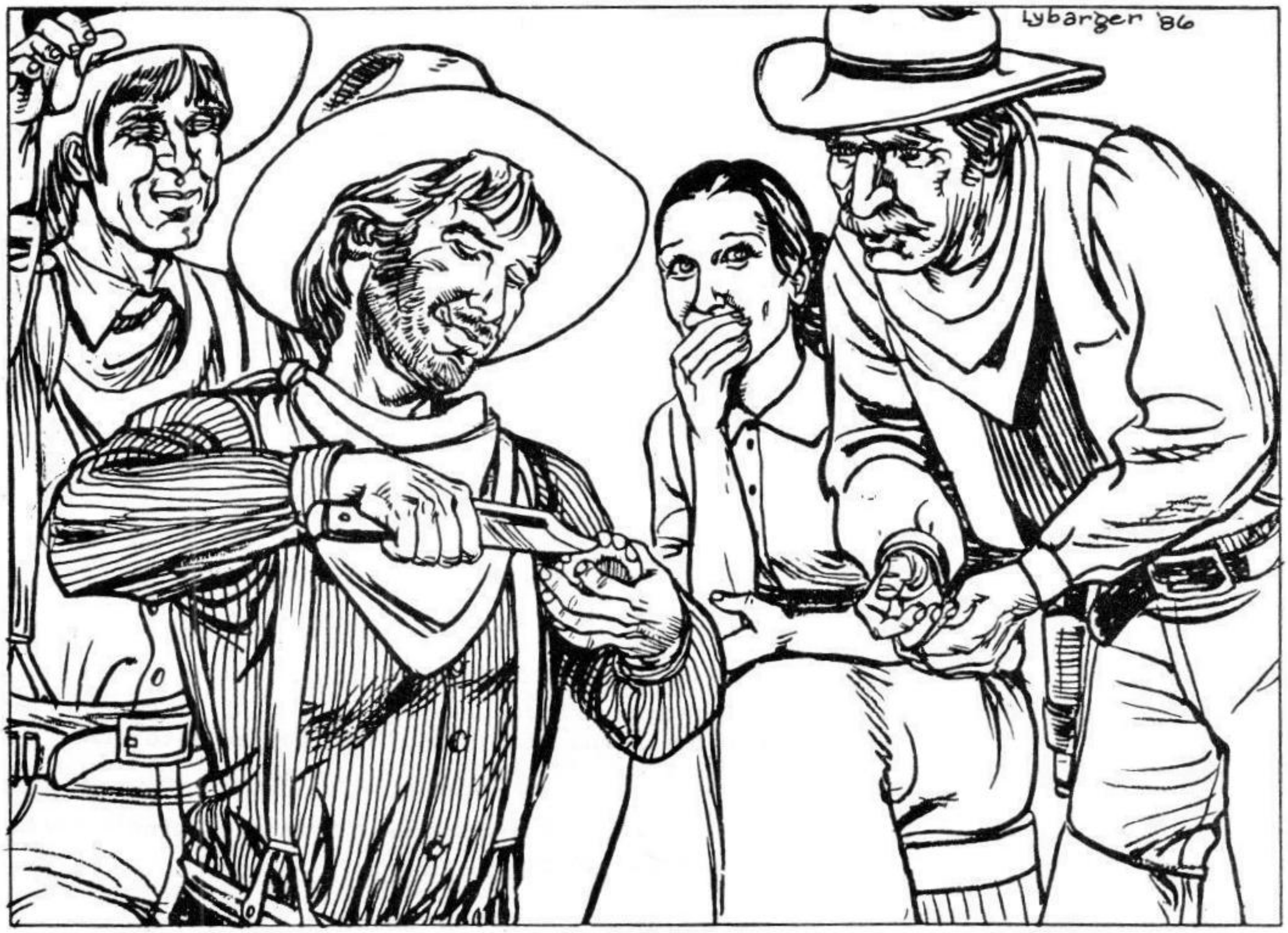
"You know anybody around who'd sell some of that?"

"Salt port and beans I freight. No fancies, the boss says. Candy I carry for me, but for a friend of Joe's," he paused for dramatic effect, "and another one with a sweet tooth, you got it. I take you to my wagon and you choose from my sack, yeah?"

Tommy's grin vanished as Hill gave an anguished oath and snatched out the offending set of teeth again. Tommy sighed and pulled the big Barlow knife from his belt sheath. "Give it here, Joe,"

He was rewarded with pure suspicion. "What're you planning, son?"

Tommy flipped the big hunting knife jauntily and palmed it far down the blade. "Just to trim some of those ridges." The sheriff vacillated, sighed and surrendered the teeth. While Sheriff Hill restrained himself from wringing his hands, Tommy poked and pried and scraped.



Hill cleared his throat diffidently. "Ahh, those are store-bought new, ya remember."

"Hmmm..." Tommy's finicky concentration made the tip of his tongue protrude firmly clamped between his teeth and tucked into the corner of his twisted mouth.

Hill shifted his feet and volunteered to Laurie, "I swear I've lived on mashed beans and oatmeal for a month waiting fer them."

Tommy's slitted eyes abruptly crinkled in satisfaction. He blew away the scrapings and handed the teeth over, beaming. "Try 'em now, Joe."

Hill gingerly fitted them in his mouth and brightened immediately. "Hey, that *is* better," he exclaimed. "Still not perfect but now I can stand 'em long enough to get some callouses." He shook hands. "Now, then. With that business over, you gonna introduce the lady or not?"

Tommy admitted defeat and responded. "Laurie, this here's Sheriff Joe Hill--Joe, this is Mrs. Laurie Sullivan. She's up lookin' for her husband. You're gonna have to introduce your friend."

It was Hill's turn to be deaf to hints as he shook hands, musing aloud. "Sullivan, Sullivan. Don't ring any bells. But he might be known around by something different. Even just a nickname." He laughed and illustrated his point by clapping his companion on the shoulder. "Lake Pavel here. I don't think he's known in twenty camps as anything but Big Pole."

Tommy perked up. "Is that 'cause you're tall as one or 'cause yer Polish?"

The big man sucked his candy and thumped his barrel chest. "Polish, me."

"That's near Czechoslavakia, ain't it?" Tommy's interest was patent.

Pavel grinned around the horehound and said to Hill, "I like this fellow. You keep his lady company. I'm going to take him for candy."

"Don't be long," Hill enjoined. "Dinner's up soon's the meat's brown. You like steak, don't ya, ma'am?" He paused anxiously in the midst of rubbing his hands.

Laurie nodded a little bewildered by the assumed invitation. "But Moishe..."

"Yeah, we got one more at the wagon, Joe," Tommy added.

"Moishe? Jew?"

"He's a good kid--gonna be a rabbi, I guess."

The sheriff blew out his moustache. "Sure, then. I'll just throw another one on the fire and we'll spread the beans some more." He bawled after the vanishing pair, "Don't be long!"

Laurie heard Tommy's curious voice drifting back. "Friend of mine's from Poland. What's it like?" The cheerful eclectic, collecting again.

Laurie said, "I'd better get Moishe if it's so soon."

Hill tipped her a conspiratal wink. "Little lady, I ain't seen solid food in a month. Pavel brought these beefsteaks an' I aim *to eat*! Ya cain't chew jerkey even with teeth!"

* * *

Moishe Bender stole a peek at Laurie and Pavel who'd come through the flap that separated Sheriff Hill's living quarters from his business--the largest of Bitter Springs' saloons. The non-Kosher meal, of which he could wistfully share only the beans, had been over some while but Laurie had swiftly become a favorite of the sheriff's, and shy Laurie had oddly taken to him as well. Moishe supposed the man was all right, though the carter was too big and booming a man to be contained in the little room for a nervous Moishe's preference.

As always outside his own community, he felt himself become invisible. Perhaps that was just as well. From his rabbi's experiences, a Jew could find himself all too painfully the center of attention. Yes, Hill was not unkind, merely dismissive--and at least he had good reason. His gallant attendance on Laurie wasn't hard to fathom, even the obvious good-natured needling of Tommy to one side. She was a lovely woman, the forget-me-not eyes in the china face were fringed with the longest lashes not on a calf, and made a pleasing focus to contrast with the richly dark hair. Thus, he was surprised to see her in the company of the carter alone.

Laurie caught his eye and her face lighted in friendly fashion. She touched Big Pole's arm and indicated Moishe. He followed her as she threaded through the tables toward the boy. Young Bender put a finger in his place and closed his book politely. "Moishe! We missed you."

"Oh, I just came out here to take advantage of the good light to catch up a little."

"Are we disturbing you, then?"

He sat up as she poised to go, aware all at once that he *was* lonely. "No, please, sit down. Both of you."

Big Pole craned at his glass as Moishe slipped a ribbon where his finger had been and stowed the little book in a coat pocket. "What are you drinking?"

"Just a little Schnaaps."

Big Pole beamed reminiscently. "All this time and I never knew Joe had any among his bottles of rotgut. That is a man's drink." He struck Moishe's shoulder in approval. "For you, Mrs. Sullivan?"

"Oh, no, no thank you, nothing. I'll just sit with you two." As the man turned in his chair to catch the barman's attention, Laurie cocked her head gently at Moishe. "Homesick?" she mouthed. The boy blushed and shook his head, prayer curls dancing. She pulled her shawl up further. "Tommy wants to have a talk with Sheriff Joe, so I thought I'd keep you company." Her eyes sparkled and she added impishly, "Keep your nose out of your book like Avram said to."

Moishe blushed and smiled again, sheepishly this time. Laurie was relaxed and happy tonight; the sparkle in place of her usual quiet made her all at once a handsome woman. No wonder Big Pole was glad to squire her--and bask in the envy of half the men at the nearby tables.

The big man was embroiled in an argument with the barman. "Sure I gotta tab! I bring Joe half his whiskey anyway! You know me--Big Pole!"

"Sure I know ya, but I'm tellin' ya I ain't got you on the slate."

Brumbling, Big Pole fished in a pocket for a coin, then his face brightened. "Ah, yes. Only Joe would use my whole name--very businesslike is Joe. Luke up Pavel Ludek--and bring me my Schnaaps."

Moishe froze. Raising his head slowly, he saw Laurie reacting in mirror concert. As Big Pole picked up his glass in satisfaction, Laurie spoke faintly. "Pavel, your name is Ludek?"

There was a quality in her voice that stilled the jovial man and made him set his glass down untouched to stare. "Yes, that's right. What's wrong, Mrs. Sullivan?"

"I've been looking for you under that name. I was told you might know where my husband went."

"Sullivan?"

"He may not be known by that name," she said carefully. She avoided Moishe's intent look. "He--he's a tall man, unusually handsome with straight nose, and black hair. It waves and one lock always falls over his forehead. He...he has a patrician manner."

Big Pole's face cleared. "Irish! Yes, I didn't know him by Sullivan. I did not really know him but I gave him a lift to the next camp. Let me think--did he mention where he was going? Ah! He said something about trying his luck out of Stockton."

"Oh, thank you, Pavel!" She gripped his hand.

"How long ago was this, Big Pole?" the practical Moishe put in.

The big man waved offhandedly. "Oh, not three weeks ago. Even up here, a man of so regular face I would not remember clearly after a while, especially one quiet who kept to himself. But the manner, *that* I remember...funny, I don't remember him so tall. Maybe already I am forgetting. I hope I have helped you?" Laurie nodded dumbly and looked at her knotted fingers, once again twisting her wedding band.

Suddenly, uncomfortable, Big Pole drained the last of his Schnaaps with a casualness that elicited Moishe's little gasp of empathy. He stood and excused himself, as Tommy emerged from the inner room. Tommy nodded to him and patted his duster pocket in acknowledge appreciation. He approached the table and stood looking down at the bowed heads. "You two 'bout ready to head for camp?"

"Tommy, Big Pole's *sur*name is Lukdek...he told me where Kevin went."

Lillard stood very still. "Where?"

"Stockton, he said."

"Well, so we're heading south anyway."

"But, Tommy," Moishe looked up quickly. "Stockton is on the San Joaquin River. It is far below Sacramento City--not in the ring of north camps at all. We are looking in the wrong place!"

Tommy's face twisted. "Well, now, you still gotta go through Sacramento City, *an'* you gotta lay in fresh supplies, so's Laurie can support herself."

Alert, Moishe had not missed the pronoun. "Just us? Aren't you coming, Tommy?"

Moishe peripherally saw the dismay, the near panic, that spread across Laurie's features. "I...uh...I got some urgent business come up. You'll be all right; yer next stop is Clanton and then you're on the same route going back. Ya know the way now. Keep the wagon. I'll get a horse up here an' pick the thing up late at Avram's house."

"But, Tommy," Moishe and Laurie wailed in chorus. Laurie's breath caught and Moishe continued alone. "I don't know the camps in the south, Tommy. How are we to do without you?"

"I don't know 'em either, kid. Haven't been to the camps south, myself. Don't worry, I'll catch up with you in Sacramento City and help you find a reliable guide."

TO BE CONTINUED

SAVE US FROM PRINCESSES

ILLUSTRATED BY
DANI

Ruth Radecki

Meridan was a small planet located just far enough from the central choking core of the Empire that its inhabitants were rarely molested by even those who were perched on the lowest rung of Palpatine's slippery ladder. It would have been a pointless gesture to extend a grasping finger toward these simple farmers who really had little to do with life beyond their own atmosphere; it would have been like attempting to flex a muscle that was actually useless, unchangeable fat.

Because of its semi-remoteness, Meridan was not frequented by a steady stream of off-worlders; but due to its lack of Imperial entanglements, it had still managed to become somewhat of a respected place of escape. Those weary traders, Alliance sympathizers, smugglers, or fugitives who needed just a few hours of peace could find it on Meridan. The natives had no real problem with such a motley set of people sliding through their ports, but long ago they had issued a proviso that assured that life would remain peaceful on their planet: no rowdiness was tolerated. Visitors were allowed to keep their weapons as a sign of faith, but if anyone should show even the slightest sign of using them, they would be summarily escorted to their ship, which was then all but fired from a slingshot to remove them from the planet.

To assure that there would be no risk of promoting possible errors in judgment, Meridan's ports didn't offer any amusements for the benefit of those who were passing through. There were no women (or other assorted creatures) for sale, no gambling dens, not even any holo-vid shows. The only concession they made was in the form of cantinas, and even though they served up every concoction known to the galaxy, the bartenders kept a close eye on their customers so that no one imbibed too much. Propriety was the unyielding rule of this small planet. These restrictions kept the most boisterous of spacers away, and those who did drop in, respected the rules of conduct. It all added up to make Meridan a quiet, unassuming, and altogether boring place.

In short, it was not the kind of place that one would expect to see Han Solo visiting.

Solo strolled through the darkened main street of Ladera, Meridan's biggest port, with his perennial Wookiee shadow following just a few feet behind him. The relative safety of the planet's environment showed in the fact that while the restraining flap on Solo's holster was unsnapped, his hand was nowhere near the grip of his blaster, and he was walking freely, loosely, simply adding to the natural lankiness of his gait. All in all, the Corellian actually appeared to be quite at home on Meridan.

But Solo had to admit to himself that this place was not exactly his idea of fun. But fun was not the name of the game right now--business was. Thanks to a fellow smuggler, Jarek Templar, Han now had a line on a very promising deal. While scrounging around on Temilos, he and Chewbacca had happened to bump into Templar, who had first looked quite surprised and then strangely happy, as if he were relieved to see them for some reason only he knew.

Soon Solo assumed that he had pinpointed the reason behind Templar's relief. Templar explained to the Corellian that he had recently visited Meridan and had been offered a fairly lucrative run, but he didn't know if he would be able to accept the contract. Naturally, that piqued Solo's interest, but he made sure that his interest didn't show. First of all, it wasn't exactly a good reflection on his reputation to jump all over a compatriot's possible contract; no one with a hot prospect would trust him anymore. Most smugglers hardly ever gave much thought to heisting from an outside party, but screwing over a fellow smuggler was the unpardonable sin. And, secondly, Solo made it a practice never to accept a hand-me-down deal without carefully feeling it out first.

"And how about you, Solo?" Jarek had asked. "You had any decent charters lately?"

Han wasn't about to volunteer the information that he and Chewbacca had had only one charter in the last four months, and even though they had been judicious about their spending, they were now so broke that he was beginning to seriously consider carrying another load of spice for Jabba the Hutt. "Things could be better," he told Templar.

Templar seemed to be suppressing a grin as he asked, "Would you like to take over this job?"

Han began to wonder if he had really been that transparent. "Well,..."

"It pays well," Templar assured him. "Four thousand on pick-up, four thousand on delivery."

The Corellian had to admit to himself that that amount of credits would get himself and his Wookiee co-pilot back afloat, at least for a while. But he still had to camouflage his anxiety. "If it pays so good, why aren't you taking it?"

"Because I'm waiting to hear on a job that pays twice as much," Jarek quickly replied, causing Solo to wince inwardly and bringing a barely discernable growl from the heretofore silent Chewbacca. "But these people are sort of desperate, Han. I can't leave them hanging high and dry. If I could tell them that I had a replacement for me--well, they'd have a pilot, you'd have some pocket money, and I'd have a relieved conscience."

Even though Han was beginning to feel as if he were caught in a sabacc match, he decided that as long as he had gone this far, he might as well pursue this to the end. "So what's the cargo?"

Once again, Templar seemed to be covering a smile as he answered, "Nothing really spectacular."

"What?"

"It's nothing really spectacular," Templar repeated. "Look, it's nothing that you really have to worry yourself about. It's not slaves, and it's not any sort of addictive substance. Trust me--you won't have any problems with it."

Solo made it a practice never to trust anyone who relied on the words, "trust me," but he knew Jarek Templar well enough to believe that Templar wouldn't try to hoist a rotten deal onto his back, especially since Templar went out of his way to mention the two cargoes that Han refused to carry. So he decided to trust him.

"What's the destination?" he then asked.

"Canobia."

"A four-day haul? I guess that's not so bad."

"For eight thousand credits, it sure as hell isn't. So are you going to take it?"

Solo shifted his gaze to Chewbacca. "I don't know, pal. What do you think?"

Well, unless you want to keep eating nothing but food concentrates, I think we'd better take it, Chewbacca replied. *I don't know if we can afford not to.*

Solo rolled it around in his mind a little more, and then he finally gave his answer. "Why the hell not?"

That was what brought him and Chewbacca to Meridan at this moment. Templar had volunteered to return to Meridan according to the agreement that he had made with his contact, and he would tell this contact that his new ride would be arriving one standard day later. This gave Solo and Chewbacca ample time to get the *Millennium Falcon* ready for this haul--as if they could really do anything beyond spitting on the chrome and using one of Han's old shirts to polish it.

Solo stopped in the middle of the street and scanned the neat little storefronts until he found the place that was emitting the most light. When he looked above the arched doorway, he found a placard announcing the name that Templar had told him to look for: Katza's Cantina.

"Okay, Chewie," he said, "this is it."

Solo approached the cantina and paused just outside the old-fashioned swinging double doors. After squinting a bit to prepare himself for the wash of light that he expected upon entering, he pushed the doors open. There was no blinding light. Most other cantinas flooded their entrances with brightness so that incoming patrons would be temporarily disoriented while those already inside could get a good hard look at the newcomer. Not here on Meridan, though. Who had any need to be apprehensive of the slowly squeaking hinges of the door as it was opened? Solo was still a bit confused, however, due to this lack of the expected, so he stood on the threshold of the cantina.

Something wrong, Han? Chewbacca asked since his entrance to the building was blocked by the Corellian's inert body.

"No, no," Solo quickly denied.

He remained immobile for a few seconds. Even though he had nothing and no one to fear here, he still had to soak up his surroundings so that he would know what to expect. His keen hazel eyes swept over the interior of the cantina and saw that it was only about half full. The inhabitants were mostly humanoids of various races, but there were representatives of other species as well, none of whom appeared to be worth worrying about. It was definitely safe.

Solo finally lifted one booted foot off the threshold and strode into the cantina, with Chewbacca trailing behind him. This imposing pair, the handsome but slightly scowling man and the towering Wookiee, leisurely circled the bar that was in the center of the room until they chose their places, standing where they could keep their eyes on the door. "Never let the outside world see your back," the Corellian always said, "or else *you* will never see it again." Exposing his back wasn't really his foremost concern this time, however; he wanted to be sure that his contact could see him the moment he/she/it came in. And he wanted to be sure that he could see his contact from the first moment, too.

A couple of minutes passed and no one left or entered the cantina, so Han and Chewbacca each ordered a drink from the small, sad-faced bartender. Han spent more time spinning his glass on the top of the bar than lifting it to his lips to drink from it. He wasn't about to be drunk or even marginally tipsy when his contact arrived. He liked his booze at the proper time, but he couldn't afford to let anything, no matter how big or how small, threaten to snatch any or all of those credits out of his needy hands.

Another half-hour ticked by, and even though there had been a bit of traffic passing through the squeaky swinging doors, no one had approached Solo. A couple of the new arrivals gave Chewbacca a brief, cursory glance, but that wasn't an uncommon experience. Everywhere Solo and Chewbacca went, with Kashyyyk probably being the only exception, there was always someone who gaped at the seven-foot Wookiee as if he were something out of a dream (or maybe a nightmare for some). That reaction had worked to Solo's advantage more than once; if his scowl, fist, or blaster failed to deter a bothersome aggressor, a couple of bared fangs and a bone-shattering howl from Chewbacca would probably do the trick. The funny thing about this whole situation was that Solo was probably one of a selected handful of beings in the galaxy who knew that beneath Chewbacca's gruff and threatening exterior, there lay a filling of the sweetest and mushiest whipped cream imaginable--and he would take the cream filling over the fangs and howls any day.

This is getting to be a little ridiculous, Chewbacca commented as he shook the sweaty residue of his glass from his hand. *The fact that they're late is not a good sign.*

"I know," Solo replied, chewing on his lower lip a bit restlessly.

Chewbacca took a deep breath before his voiced his next thought. *Do you think it's possible that Jarek stiffed us? That he came here yesterday, picked up his cargo and down payment, and is now on his way to Canobia to get the rest of it?*

Solo's eyes seemed to darken just a bit as he responded, "I have to admit that that thought crossed my mind, Chewie, but I can't believe he'd do that to us. Templar's done some underhanded things before, but never to us. He knows we'd catch on too fast. Besides, I don't think he would've given us the hard-sell treatment if he was gonna yank the rug out from underneath us. If he was gonna do that, why would he make it a point to mention that other job?"

To throw us off the track, Chewbacca immediately answered. *No man in his right mind would turn down an eight-thousand-credit job unless he had something better lined up.*

"Come on, Chewie, you've got to quit being such a pessimist."

Listen to this, the Wookiee said to no one in particular as he rolled his blue eyes up toward the ceiling. *The galaxy's great cynic is telling *me* to quit being such a pessimist.*

"Oh, shut up," Solo grumbled, his scowl becoming more pronounced.

Chewbacca picked up his glass. *I think I will. As a matter of fact, I'm going to go sit in that booth back there and finish my drink. If no one shows up in the next fifteen or twenty minutes, I'm going back to the *Falcon.**

As the Wookiee shuffled off to a booth a few feet away, Solo picked up his own glass and took a fairly substantial swallow. Chewbacca had a point, damn it, but the Corellian wasn't going to give up that easily. He had nothing left to lose.

The creaky whine of the door's hinges announced the arrival of another party. Solo immediately looked up, but one quick glance told him that this person couldn't be his contact. She was a tall girl, a teenager with a body that was caught in that awkward moment of adolescence--there were peaks and valleys in the correct places, but they were still soft, not completely formed.

Solo was no chauvinist, so he didn't dismiss her simply because she was a young girl. It was just that nothing he could clearly see of her--everything except her face--seemed to suggest that she was "desperate," as Templar had said. Her head was topped by a cascade of long ash blonde hair, spilling down her back in waves that hinted at it having been carefully braided until only recently. Her clothes, while not overly fancy or expensive, still showed a similar amount of tidiness; she wore a nicely tailored white jumpsuit, cinched around the waist with a brown belt, and it betrayed no signs of dirt, grime, or sweat. The same went for her knee-high brown boots--no nicks, no scuffs, no nothing. This girl wasn't from Meridan, she wasn't in trouble, and she wasn't looking for this lonely, impatient Corellian.

With a muffled expletive, Solo looked down into his glass and began to seriously consider dumping the remaining contents over his head. Anything to liven up this vigil.

Then, quite suddenly, Solo wasn't alone. "Hi, there," a voice just behind his right shoulder greeted him. It was an odd voice, a bit strained, almost as if it were the voice of a child attempting to imitate an adult. But who--?

Solo closed his eyes and barely managed to suppress a groan. That girl may not have been his contact, but she had still been looking for him, or at least someone like him. He sure as hell wasn't in the mood for this. It wasn't the first time that he'd been approached by a teenage girl, and even though a certain part of his brain might have happily considered accepting whatever invitation she might extend, he was sensible enough to know that it just wasn't worth messing around with a girl who was probably a dozen years younger than he was. So he would have to turn her off--and *fast*.

"I said, hello," the girl prodded him, turning what he supposed was meant to be a purr into something more like a growl. "The least you could do is say 'hello' back."

Reluctantly Solo opened his eyes and then glanced back over his shoulder. He found himself looking at a face that he had to admit was pretty--long and sort of thinly shaped, high cheekbones, nice brown eyes set under smoothly shaped brows--but not all that memorable.

"Hello back," he said in an intentional growl. "Now, go away."

She gave him the disapproving gaze of a schoolteacher. "That's not very nice."

"I know. Beat it."

"I will--if you buy me a drink."

Solo couldn't hold in a snort at that. "You're not old enough to drink." Plus he didn't have enough money on him.

"Yes, I am," the girl insisted poutily.

"No, you're *not!*" He was getting tired of this.

She backed away from the issue, and for a moment the Corellian thought he saw a tear glimmer in her eye. He dismissed it as either a figment of his imagination or else a trick on her part to elicit sympathy, then turned back to his half-empty glass, assuming that this amateur tease would go away.

But she wasn't finished; she simply changed position, moving around to his left side and leaning against the bar with her elbows in imitation of Solo's hunchbacked stance. "So what's your name?" she asked brightly. The Corellian just turned his head toward her and glared. "Oh, come on," she said, "what harm could it do?" Solo's glare only deepened, and his normally hazel eyes seemed to flash nothing but golden bolts of lightning. The girl still wouldn't give up. As a matter of fact, she leaned in toward Solo, coming so close to him that a few of her blond hairs clung to the sleeve of his shirt. "Is it because you don't know mine? Well, it's Talley."

The Corellian cracked a very deceptive smile and responded, "Talley, go away. You're bothering me."

She also grinned, revealing a row of straight white teeth, and it was at that moment that Solo regretfully came to the conclusion that this girl was not going to leave until she was ready. He was already beginning to lose his touch. What a depressing thought.

Talley then stepped away from Solo so that she could get a better look at him from head to toe. "You're a smuggler, aren't you?" she asked.

"What's it to you?"

"Just wondering, that's all. But I don't think I've ever seen a smuggler wearing pants quite like yours. Is that stripe supposed to add a little dash or something?"

For once, something she said got through his defensive outer shield and made its way to a spot deep within him, making him pause, reflect, and remember. He could never completely banish the ghosts of those horrible days of humiliation from his mind, those days when the Academy for which he had fought so hard had betrayed him. If only Talley knew this, if only she realized what she was now putting him through... But maybe he didn't really want to forget; after all, the military flourish of the stripes on his pants couldn't help but remind him every day.

In the midst of his reverie, Talley had moved in close to Solo again, and suddenly her long fingers were reaching toward his chin. "That's an interesting scar," she remarked. "How did you get it?"

The Corellian's increasingly brittle patience fragmented completely, and he couldn't--and wouldn't--tolerate being touched at this moment. He swiftly pirouetted toward her and grasped her outstretched wrist in a nearly bone-crushing grip, pushing her arm up and to the side as if he were actually going to break it.

Suddenly two voices rang out from opposite ends of the cantina at almost the same time. The first was Chewbacca's. He had kept quiet during the rest of Solo's plight, but when he saw what his captain was apparently thinking of doing, he barked out a simple warning: *Watch it, Han!*

The voice of his trusted Wookiee companion would have been enough to stop Solo, but as it was, the second unfamiliar voice succeeded in totally destroying his concentration.

"*There* you are!"

Solo turned to look at the new arrival, a burly bearded man standing in the doorway, and realized that the object of that relieved phrase was the girl whose slender wrist was encased in his fingers. He glanced back at her face just in time to see her expression turn from one of pain and surprise to one of imperious anger. Something funny was going on here.

The man hurriedly made his way around the bar, nearly dropping the large satchel he was carrying, until he was standing next to Solo and Talley "You shouldn't have gone running off like that," he scolded the girl. "You had me worried!"

"I shall go wherever I want!" she snapped in return. "And how *dare* you address me like that!"

The man took a deep, steadying breath that seemed to urgently beg for a gift of patience from the nearest deity. "You're right, of course. Forgive me, Your Highness."

"'Your Highness'?" Solo echoed.

The man finally turned his attention to the Corellian. "Yes. You must be Captain Solo."

"Uh, yeah."

"I thought so. Captain Templar told me to look for a man with a low-slung blaster and a Wookiee co-pilot. I figured there couldn't be more than one person answering that description." He paused and grinned, but when Solo made no reaction, he continued, "I am Shadron Derlock, royal attache' to King Leofric deMorga of Seralon."

"That's some mouthful," Solo remarked.

Derlock acknowledged that with a nod and then asked, "Did Captain Templar fill you in on the details of our charter?"

"Most of it. Four thousand credits on pick-up, four thousand on delivery on Canobia. But he didn't tell me what the cargo is."

"You're holding onto her wrist."

As if he had been stung by some unseen source, Solo finally let go of Talley's wrist and gaped at her in disbelief. She just smiled smugly. Feeling like he might choke, Solo turned toward the booth where his co-pilot was poised and croaked, "Chewie, come here."

"This is the Princess Talleyana deMorga, youngest daughter of King Leofric and Queen Melina," Derlock told the Corellian as Chewbacca arrived. "You see, Captain Solo, one year ago Seralon was invaded by the Empire because of the King's Alliance sympathies. Fortunately, the King's network of contacts was able to get the news to him with just enough time to spare. To keep the family safe, he sent each member to a different spot in the galaxy. He then worked on establishing a new home for the family. Now that he's accomplished that, he's ready to bring the family back together, and they're all meeting on Canobia."

"Why don't *you* just take her there?" Solo asked, still not quite recovered from the shock of this whole revelation.

"I haven't exactly wasted my year here on Meridan. I've established a farm here, I've made contacts--I want to stay. Besides, King Leofric believes that it will be less risky to have independent pilots shuttle the family to Canobia. Hopefully, the Empire will be less likely to suspect anything."

Four days locked up in hyperspace on the *Falcon* with this princess wasn't Solo's idea of a swell time, but in a sense, he really had no choice but to accept. "Okay, you've got yourself a ship."

"Thank you very much, Captain," Derlock said in obvious and understandable relief. He dug in the pocket of the jacket he was wearing and pulled out a small, heavy sack. "Here is your first payment. When you dock at Canobia, go to the Golden Krayt Inn and ask for Treymas. You'll know what to do from there."

DANi

Solo took the sack from Derlock's hand and experienced what he would almost refer to as a thrill racing through his blood at the feel of those credits resting in his palm.

Derlock turned to Talleyana, handing her the satchel, and said, "Good luck to you, Your Highness, and do give your father my regards."

"Yeah, yeah," she replied. "Have fun with that patch of dirt you call a farm."

He ignored the remark and addressed one last thought to Solo. "Clear skies, Captain."

"Yeah, thanks."

Derlock quickly exited the cantina, leaving Solo and Chewbacca alone with their royal passenger.

"I figured that this four-day trip would be terribly boring," Talleyana commented with a feral grin. "Now I'm not so sure."

Solo squeezed the sack of credits to reassure himself. "Let's just leave, okay?"

"Of course," she immediately agreed. She held the satchel up in front of Solo and said, "Carry this, would you?" When he made no move to take it, she simply dropped it, and it narrowly missed squashing Han's toes. Then with an exaggerated sway of her hips, she set off toward the door.

Well, I think this is going to be one of our more memorable runs, Chewbacca remarked.

"For me, yeah," Solo replied. "You're just lucky that she doesn't have a thing for Wookiees."

Maybe she does, and I just haven't found out yet.

Ignoring his co-pilot's comment, Han continued, "Listen, just go after her. I'll catch up with you in a second."

With a slight reassuring smile, Chewbacca went after the retreating figure of Talleyana. As soon as both of them had passed through the door, Solo grabbed his glass and downed the remainder of his drink in one swallow. As he felt the liquor burn its way to his stomach, he muttered, "Jarek Templar, I'm gonna get you!"

Pulling himself away from the bar proved to be a difficult task, but Solo knew that if he didn't show up at the docking bay soon, Chewbacca would surely reappear to pry him away, even if it meant leaving a few of the Corellian's fingernails embedded in the bar, the floor, the threshold of the door... It was an ugly thought, worse than the thought of spending four days trapped in hyperspace with that royal lollipop. With another mumbled epithet directed toward all involved parties as well as their familial lineages, Solo picked up the satchel and took two shuffling steps away from the bar before he remembered that he had to lift his feet in order to walk. Once he recalled this, his gait became more natural and began to carry him toward the exit of the cantina.

Along the way he could feel the eyes of the patrons on his back. His tussle with Talleyana had not gone unnoticed; obviously none of them wanted to take Solo's place, none of them envied him and probably still wouldn't envy him if he shook the sack of credits before their pitying eyes. Well, he didn't want their pity. And he could handle that little girl.

Confidently, he approached the door and pushed open the left half, but before he could completely pass through, his fingertips slipped off the polished wood. With a creak that sounded uncannily like the hysterical giggle of Fate, the door swung back to slap Han in a rather uncomfortable spot, causing him to drop the satchel and nearly cream his foot again. As one unsuccessfully stifled laugh wafted in from one corner of the cantina interior, Solo found himself fervently praying that this was not a sign of things to come.

With a disgusted jerk, Solo retrieved Talleyana's satchel and stepped out into the street, finally away from the sympathetic eyes within the cantina. Chewbacca and the little princess were not making good time; they were only halfway up the street, apparently being slowed by Talleyana, who was speaking very animatedly about gods-knew-what to a decidedly disinterested Chewbacca. Solo regripped the handle of the satchel in his slightly sweaty palm and considered how just one well-aimed rifling shot with the thing would probably knock Her Wonderfulness's pretty little head right off her shoulders. The satchel certainly was heavy enough to do the job.

But Han Solo would be the first person to admit that he had a price. If that pretty little head was going to bring him another four thousand credits, he wasn't about to let anything happen to it. As for what he would do *after* he had received the balance of his payment--well, that was another story...

* * *

"What is this, a *joke*?" Talleyana nearly screamed.

They were now gathered in the docking bay where the *Millennium Falcon* sat, serenely waiting to ferry them from Meridan to Canobia. Han was used to such reactions to his ship's apparently dilapidated condition, but coming from this girl, it was nothing but adding unnecessary insult to the deeply felt injury that she had already dealt him. Still, he kept a shaky lid on his temper.

"Derlock did this to me on purpose!" the girl continued to rant. "He never liked me!"

I wonder why? Solo thought.

"He hates me! He wants me to *die* before I can get back to my family again! So he gets me a pilot whose ship is held together by rubber bands and chewing gum. When my father hears about this, Derlock won't have very long to live on that stupid little farm of his!"

"Just cool it, okay?" Solo broke in on Talleyana's tirade. "The *Falcon* may not look like much, but she can hit point five past lightspeed. You'll make it to Canobia in one piece, kid, so don't worry."

Talleyana paused, staring up at the Corellian with wide, disbelieving and definitely angry eyes. "What did you call me?"

What a strange one I've got here, Solo thought. *First she hits on me like a hooker out of a bad holo-vid, and now that I know she's royalty, she's playing Princess High-and-Mighty and rubbing my nose in it. Well, if she thinks I'm gonna grovel, she's mistaken!*

Chewbacca saw this whole pattern of thought play across his captain's face, and even though he sympathized, he was calm enough to know that a knock-down, drag-out fight wouldn't do any of them any good right now. *Humor her, Han,* he rumbled gently. *For now.*

Chewbacca was the only being in the universe who could speak only five words and have Solo react as if the gods themselves had spoken. The Corellian focused on Talleyana's haughty face, favoring her with a totally plastic, 'eat my shit' smile. "Your Highness," he said through gritted teeth.

Either Talleyana missed the irony in Solo's face, or else she chose to ignore it. "That's better."

"Good. Now why don't we get on board the *Falcon*? That way we can get you back to your family all the sooner." *And they can have you!*

Now it was Talleyana's turn to smile, but she was being totally serious. "Maybe I can trust you. After all, you *are* built a lot better than your ship is." With that said, she sashayed up the ramp into the *Falcon*'s main hold.

"I'm going to kill her, Chewie," Han remarked.

Chewbacca nodded understandingly. *I know, but it's only four days.*

"I wish it was four hours," Solo muttered. "I'll bet it's gonna seem more like four *years*."

"Well, Captain Solo?" Talleyana called from within the ship. "Aren't you coming?" She paused, then added, "By the way, who does your housekeeping? This place is a *mess*!"

"I'm going to kill her," Solo repeated. He morosely paced up the ramp with the gait of a man approaching his own execution. After a moment, Chewbacca followed him.

* * *

"So this thing really does fly," Talleyana commented from her position in the navigator's seat. "I suppose stranger things have happened."

Solo bristled at the reference to the *Falcon* as "this thing" and simply concentrated on feeding the coordinates for Canobia into the navi-computer. "Are you strapped in back there?" he asked the girl.

"Yes. Not that it really makes any difference. This thing can't possibly go that fast."

This time it was a bit harder for Han to keep quiet but he still managed to do it. This little princess might have been only about sixteen, but she sure had one hell of a mouth on her. She had probably never said one kind thing in her life. No wonder Derlock had dumped her into someone else's hands.

Finally the *Falcon* slipped out of Meridan's gravitational pull, and it was safe to engage the hyperdrive system. For a moment, space seemed to stand still as the transfer circuits smoothly shifted the ship's thrust from the sublight drive to the supralight drive. Then the *Falcon* left everything behind as it ricocheted into the darkness of hyperspace.

"Whoa!" Talleyana breathed in surprise. "I take it back. You were telling the truth!"

Solo found himself glancing back at her in mild shock. "Yes, I was," was all he could say.

Han, I'm still a little concerned about the wriing in the weapons system, Chewbacca said. *I'm going to go have a look and see if I can do anything more.*

"Why?" Solo asked. "We're not going to need firepower for a while."

I know, but I'd still feel better if it was in good working order as soon as possible.

Han felt a momentary wave of panic surge over him. *You hairy bastard, you're leaving me alone with her!* But then it passed. If he couldn't handle Talleyana, then he might as well check himself into the old spacers' home right now. "Okay, go ahead," he said. "And take care of these," he added, pulling the sack of credits out of his vest pocket and handing it to Chewbacca.

The Wookiee pushed himself out of his chair and lumbered his way out of the cockpit. There was silence for a few moments. Then Talleyana spoke up. "I know your last name is Solo, but I don't know what your first name is." Solo remained silent. "So, what is it?"

Now that she had asked a direct question, he couldn't ignore her. Besides, what could a simple question like that hurt? "Han."

"Han Solo. That's short and to the point. Do you have any idea what it's like to go through life with a name like Her Highness the Princess Talleyana deMorga of Seralon?"

Solo found himself relaxing just a bit; that was the first vaguely human thing that Talleyana had said so far. "I can't imagine," he responded.

"What's your co-pilot's name?" she then asked.

"Chewbacca."

"You call him Chewie."

Solo nodded. "It's easier."

"He's the first Wookiee I ever saw up close." She paused, then asked, "Where are you from?"

Okay, so this was beginning to sound like an interview, but it wasn't going too badly--so far. "Corell."

"Oh. I've heard of it. Don't a lot of smugglers come from there?"

"A lot of independent pilots come from there," Solo corrected her.

"You don't have to take that tone of voice with me. I'm not stupid, you know."

Solo was almost on the point of apologizing; he actually felt guilty. But then he thought better of it and didn't say a word.

"So, do you have a girlfriend?"

Oops... "I don't think that's really any of your business," Solo responded testily.

Talleyana tilted her head, now eyeing him very suspiciously. "No, it's not possible," she murmured.

Han was really beginning to regret that he'd ever bothered to tell her his first name. This had gone steadily downhill from there. "What?"

She tilted her head in the other direction, her eyes narrowing even further. "No, you're far too good-looking. You couldn't *possibly* be a--"

Solo quickly swung around in his chair with a look on his face that made Talleyana realize, even with her royal impudence and disregard for the feelings of others, that she had gone too far. "No, I guess you're not," she quickly amended while trying to push herself back further in the chair to escape his wrath.

Han had endured quite enough interrogation from his self-impressed snit and determined to put an end to it immediately. Containing his anger as much as possible, and not dignifying her last statement with an answer, he growled through clinched teeth, "Are you hungry?"

Talleyana attempted to regain her regal bearing and answered as indifferently as possible, "Well, now that you mention it, I am."

"Terrific." He grabbed her by the arm and began to pull her out of the cockpit. "Come have dinner."

* * *

Amazingly enough, the Princess's stream of invectives began to subside; although, during the meal she did complain about the stringiness of the meat, prompting Han to consider using his spoon as a catapult to nail her between the eyes with his own portion. Instead, he just smiled charmingly and thought, *Choke on it. Blue happens to be my favorite color.*

Then, not long after dinner, Talleyana went to bed, bringing peace to this small corner of the galaxy.

"I don't know how much more of this I can take, Chewie," Solo commented, twiddling his glass of Corellian brandy in his hands. "Do you think we could tie her down to the bed or drug her to make sure she stays asleep for the next three days?"

Chewbacca woofed a short laugh. *That's very tempting. But I'm sure it can't get much worse.*

"I certainly hope not. You know, she accused me of being a one-way ticket!" he said, utilizing one of the kinder Corellian slang terms.

First Chewbacca's eyes widened comically, then, knowing it was adding insult to injury but seeing the irony of that statement, he began to laugh hysterically.

"I'm glad you find it so funny," Han mumbled before draining the last of the brandy and then tossing the glass into the disposal unit. "I need some sleep."

Chewbacca was still laughing as Solo retreated to the solitude of his cabin. When he closed the door, he found himself regretting the fact that he still hadn't fixed the locking mechanism.

In his usual leisurely pace (leisurely when it was only he who was about to crawl in under the covers) Solo undressed, tossing everything except his holster and his pants in haphazard directions. His holster went to its usual spot next to the bed, while his pants were flung over the foot of his bunk. Then he shut off the lights, got into bed, and after some heavy-duty tossing and turning, fell asleep.

He dreamed. First there were the usual formless visions of space, freedom, the joy of being alive. Stars danced around him, beckoning him to taste their beauty. Then the stars coalesced, taking shape, forming a slender body, beautiful red-flecked gold hair...Kasi. It had been nearly six standard months since he had been on Dalanos...since he had heard Kasi sing, had run his fingers through that luxuriant hair, had felt her touch on his body... Now here she was, this creature of light, holding her arms out toward him, her mouth opening, her lips forming his name...

"Han?"

That was strange. That sure didn't sound like Kasi.

"Han! Open up or else I'll let myself in!"

Han was awake instantly. Hollering "No!" he berated himself for not fixing the door lock, knowing that his protest would simply be ignored. With the intention of hastily pulling on his pants, he started to get out of bed, but as he placed one bare foot on the deck, the door to his cabin flew open, flooding the room with a light that temporarily blinded the Corellian's sleep dazed eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize that you were asleep," Talleyana remarked dreamily, happily taking in the sight of the Corellian sitting up in bed only partially covered by the sheets.

Han finally looked up at her figure, silhouetted in the doorway, and couldn't believe what he was seeing. The girl was wearing a dressing gown of black Lanubian silk, with a neckline that plunged past what even Han considered to be a good stopping point and an equally far-reaching slit up the side of the skirt. On a woman ten years older, it might have caused Solo to consider pursuing a first-hand investigation, but on Talleyana, it was simply ludicrous.

"Does your mother know you have something like that?" Solo gasped.

"What does it matter?" she answered throatily. "Do you like it?"

Solo had to put an end to this--*quickly*. "Chewie!!"

There was a bump and a rumble in the cabin next door; a moment later a somewhat sleepy and annoyed Wookiee appeared next to Talleyana in the doorway. When he saw the tableau before him, he came fully awake.

"Chewie," Solo said with barely controlled fury, "would you please show Her--Her Munificence the way back to her room?"

"What's the matter, Han?" Talleyana chirped. "Not in the mood tonight?"

Chewbacca promptly picked her up and whisked her away from Solo's cabin. "Hey!" she protested. "Put me down, you brute!" The door opened and shut as Chewbacca deposited the girl in her cabin. Almost immediately the door slid open again; Talleyana was not finished. "You can't treat me like this!" she shrieked. "I'm a princess, you know!"

Showing his total lack of patience, Chewbacca unleashed one of his best threatening roars. Its effect was instantaneous and perfect.

"Okay, fine," Talleyana whimpered.

As the door to her room closed, Chewbacca returned to Han's quarters. He grinned sheepishly at his exasperated captain. *I was wrong. It *could* get worse.*

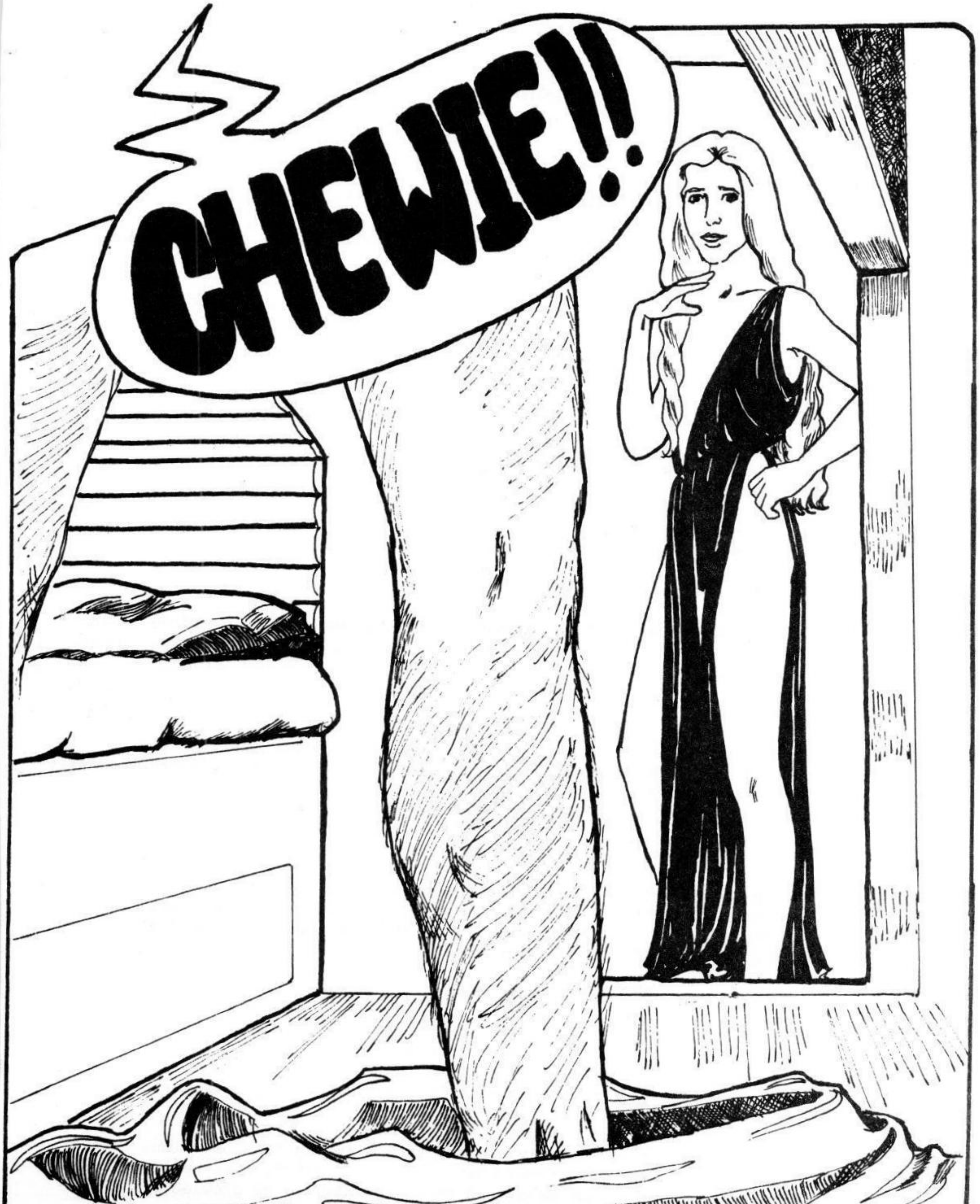
* * *

Han didn't get much sleep for the rest of that night, and he certainly didn't get back to his tempting vision of Kasi; after a few hours of slipping in and out of a doze, he left his bed, got dressed, and exited his cabin.

Chewbacca was already up and around, too, puttering in the main hold as Wookiees were sometimes known to do. Little conversation passed between them; Chewbacca knew very well that Solo would probably prefer to just forget about the events of the previous night...and he couldn't blame the Corellian at all.

Solo got himself a meager breakfast and managed to eat it even though it tasted pretty bland. Then he set to work on doing some fine-tuning on the weapons system. Anything to keep himself occupied.

Talleyana finally emerged, bringing an automatic rise to Han's blood pressure. At least she was dressed more sensibly than she had been last night, in a pair of blue pants and an embroidered blouse. But her incessant chattering about nothing was driving him absolutely crazy. Deciding that he simply didn't want to listen to her, he tuned her out, doing such an excellent job of it that he didn't notice when she left the main hold, leaving a palpable cloud of disgust behind her.


CHEWIE!!

She returned about fifteen minutes later, clutching a small silver orb in her hand, tossing it in the air a few times to amuse herself. When the novelty of that action wore off, she studied the surface of the object more closely. It wasn't completely spherical; there was a raised section running around part of the equator. Talleyana pushed on it experimentally. It slid back like a switch, and the ball began to hum and beep at the same time.

"Neat!" Talleyana exclaimed, turning the orb over in her hands some more.

As the beeping began to increase in speed, it finally attracted Solo's attention. He glanced up from what he was doing--and nearly suffered a fit of apoplexy when he saw what the girl was juggling. "Holy *shit*! Don't *touch* that!" he yelled as he raced across the deck.

Just as he reached Talleyana, she tossed the orb high in the air and giggled, "Catch it if you can!"

Solo, frantic, slammed one hand into the girl's chest, knocking her out of the way, and with his other hand, caught the orb as it descended and quickly slid the switch back into place. The noises ceased.

Then Solo started making noise. Plenty of noise. "You *idiot*!" he shouted. "Don't you have any idea what this thing is?"

"No!" she shouted in return.

"It's a *thermal detonator*! A couple more seconds and you would've blown our asses right out of existence!" Talleyana paled a bit at that news. "Where did you find it?"

"In your cabin!"

"In my--?" Han carried a couple of thermal detonators just for the direst emergencies, but since he didn't enjoy having them rolling around loosely, he usually stored them in the footlocker tucked back in his closet. "My cabin? You've been rifling my cabin?"

"Yes!"

"Oh, gods..." He grabbed her wrist and began dragging her toward his quarters, nearly yanking her arm out of its socket. When they got to his cabin, it was easy to trace Talleyana's path through the room. "What the hell gives you the right to search my cabin?"

"Since you were being so rude and not listening to me," she replied heatedly, "I was looking for something to keep me occupied!"

"You should have *asked* me instead of searching my cabin!"

"You probably wouldn't have cared. And how *dare* you speak to me like this!"

Han had to struggle violently to keep from slapping this obnoxious little brat, even though she so desperately deserved it. "Listen, sweetheart, I don't care if you're the gods-be-damned Emperor himself," he growled. "This is *my* ship. *I* am the captain. *You* are the passenger. Therefore, you do as I say. You stay out of my things, you stay out of my way, and maybe you should start acting your age for once!"

Talleyana's face crumpled and she began to cry. "You bastard," she whimpered. "I'm going to tell my father how you've treated me, and then you just wait and see if you get the rest of your stupid money."

She ran across the corridor to her own cabin, immediately closing the door behind her. If it had been an old-fashioned door on hinges, she probably would have slammed it for effect. But it still wouldn't have made a difference. Han Solo was not feeling one ounce of guilt.

* * *

The dressing-down from Solo apparently did the trick. Talleyana kept her distance from him during the remainder of the journey. She spoke to him only when it was truly necessary, and when she did speak to him, it was in a tart, petulant manner. That, he could live with. Still, he found himself wondering why the girl was so snotty.

A couple of hours before the *Falcon* was due to arrive at Canobia, Han was in the cockpit when Talleyana sought him out. "When is this tub going to land?" she asked. Her tone suggested that she considered herself to be in the presence of something just a little worse than slug slime.

"Oh, another two hours probably."

"Good." She turned to leave, but Solo was faster. His finger jabbed the door control near his chair; the door slid closed, cutting the cockpit off from the rest of the ship and trapping Talleyana inside. "Hey!" she protested. "Let me out!"

"I will. *After* I have a talk with you."

"Listen, if this is about that thermal detonator thing, I'm sorry."

Solo felt a momentary twinge of disorientation. The twerp was actually apologizing!

"But it was really *your* fault, you know!"

Ah, now *that* was more like it. "No, I don't want to talk about that," he said.

"Well then, what *do* you want to talk about?" she asked impatiently.

"Why are you so mean?"

She blinked in surprise; obviously she hadn't expected this. "I am *not* mean!"

"You've been rude to Chewie, you've been rude to me, you've been rude to the *Falcon*...I'd call that mean."

She began to shuffle. "Well, if I've been rude to you, it's because *you* have been rude to *me*!" She sighed heavily. "I know you're not enjoying this trip, but it hasn't exactly been fun for me either, you know."

"Why? Because I wouldn't let you ravage my body?"

It was meant to be a lighthearted remark, but Talleyana didn't take it that way. "No!" she denied with more force than was necessary.

Despite her answer, Solo knew that he was right to more than a slim degree. And suddenly he found himself giving her a delicate little speech. "Just because you're a princess doesn't mean that you can treat everyone like your slave. That also doesn't mean that everyone has to fall down at your feet and obey your every command. You have to give them something in return. A smile. A 'please' and a 'thank you.' Some respect. That way, they just might like you. Otherwise, Your Highness, you're going to grow up with a lot of servants but no friends."

As he spoke, Talleyana's jaw grew increasingly tighter. He was definitely having some sort of effect on her. "Are you finished?" she inquired tautly. Solo nodded. "Can I go now?" She hesitated a moment. "Please?"

Feeling slightly vindicated, Solo fingered the door control. Talleyana started to leave but then paused in the doorway, one hand delicately resting on the doorframe. She turned back to Han, her head tilted at a coy angle and with a smile on her face. "Go to hell, Solo," she said.

The little princess left the cockpit. Han leaned back in his chair and, for the first time since this whole adventure began, he laughed.

* * *

It was late winter in this hemisphere of Canobia, so a light rain was falling over Teesar, the port city where the *Millennium Falcon* docked. Han shrugged into a jacket and then went to the main hold where Talleyana was waiting with her satchel at her feet. His first thought was that her white jumpsuit wouldn't stay white much longer in this weather.

He pointed to her satchel and asked, "Do you have a coat or a jacket or something like that in there? Something with a hood?"

"Yes," she pouted. "Why?"

"Just a precaution. We may be on Canobia, but you're not in your father's hands quite yet."

As if it were a great inconvenience, she rummaged around in her satchel and pulled out a dark, hooded jacket. She put it on and pulled up the hood. It did a good job of concealing her blonde hair. "Can we go now?"

"Yeah." Solo turned his attention to his co-pilot. "Chewie, you stay here. I'm going to deliver Her Imperiousness and get our money, then I'll be right back. It shouldn't take too long."

The Wookiee appeared to be doubtful. *Are you sure?*

Solo dismissed Chewbacca's concern with a wave. "Yeah. There don't seem to be any Imps here, so we shouldn't have any problems."

Chewbacca knew that while Solo may have been a lot of different things, he certainly wasn't a fool. *All right. I'll wait here.*

Han and Talleyana left the *Falcon* and emerged into the gentle rainfall. This time Talleyana was carrying her satchel.

Because Han had been to Canobia before, he had no trouble locating the Golden Krayt Inn. There was very little traffic in their way; the inclement weather had driven a lot of people indoors.

At the inn, Han directed Talleyana into the cantina section and steered her toward the bar. Once there, he called the bartender over. "I'm looking for Treymas," he said, mentioning the name that Derlock had given him.

The 'tender motioned toward a doorway to the left of the bar. "Go through there, down the corridor, and it's the last door on the right."

Solo and Talleyana followed those directions until they came to the specified door. After Solo knocked, someone called out, "Come in!" and the door opened. The room beyond was dark, making Solo hesitate a moment, but then he and the Princess cautiously stepped inside. Almost immediately an unknown hand ripped the blaster from Solo's holster and elbowed him in the back, pushing him further into the room. A moment later, Talleyana bumped into him, nearly falling.

The door shut, the light went on, and Solo found himself looking at a couple of goons, a body huddled in the corner, most likely the hapless Treymas,...and Jarek Templar.

"Congratulations, Han, you actually made it!" Templar cheerily greeted his fellow smuggler. "Thank you for delivering the Princess to me safe and sound and in one piece!" Templar went on enthusiastically.

"To *you*?" Solo blurted, confusion showing on his face.

Now all the frivolity in the air evaporated and Templar was all business. "Yes, Han, to *me*. I know King Leofric wants his daughter back, and I also know he'll be willing to pay handsomely for her."

Talleyana's hands gripped Solo's arm in fear; as for the Corellian, he simply couldn't believe what he was hearing. It was obvious that Templar was going to hold Talleyana for ransom. What this amounted to was Templar's using information in his possession to hijack another pilot's cargo and then use it to his own advantage. This was against the smugglers' unspoken code of ethics; there truly was honor among thieves, and Templar had just broken that code. He was just about the last person Solo would have suspected of going bad, and as unbearable as he found Talleyana, he couldn't let this happen to her.

"Why?" he asked.

Templar shrugged. "I need the money."

"You won't get away with it,"

"I sure as hell will. Now, Han, you've got the down payment in your pocket, so you can just mosey along and leave Canobia right now." Templar grinned and added, "Unless, of course, you'd like to stay and get a piece of the action."

That slur on his honor was more than Solo could bear at the moment. He threw himself at his former friend; the two went down in a tangled heap. For once, this tactic didn't work to Solo's advantage. Templar regained his footing first, hauling Solo up by the front of his shirt, and then landed a punch in the Corellian's face that probably would have stunned even Chewbacca. As if that weren't bad enough, there was a report from a blaster; the shot hit Solo in the chest, propelling him back into the wall. His legs went out from underneath him, causing him to fall like a marionette whose strings had been cut, and the last thing he heard before he lost consciousness was Talleyana screaming.

* * *

Han? The voice was a rumble, transmitted through many layers of cotton, but it was still familiar. *Come on, Han, you're almost there.*

Slowly, painfully, Solo opened his eyes and found three Chewbaccas hovering above him. He blinked a couple of times and finally the three images melded into one. "Chewie?" he mumbled thickly.

Chewbacca slipped his hands underneath Solo's shoulders and helped him to sit up. A wave of vertigo made the Corellian seriously consider throwing up but it passed quickly, leaving in its wake a pounding headache worse than any hangover he had ever experienced. That was what a heavy duty stun shot could do to a person.

It took Han a moment to realize that the body he had seen earlier and assumed to be Treymas was not actually dead but was also recovering from a stun blast. The small, wispy man was sitting up in the corner, his head in his hand. When he saw that Han was conscious, he asked, "Did they get the Princess?"

Princess? Solo had to think hard about that one. "Oh," he finally answered. "Yeah, I guess they did."

"Oh, dear. The King certainly won't like this."

I don't understand, Chewbacca spoke up. *What happened here?*

Solo explained the situation to the Wookiee, his memory becoming unbent with each passing moment. "You were right, Chewie," he lamented. "Templar *did* stiff us."

I had no idea he would do something like this. Chewbacca shook his large, shaggy head.

Solo looked at the man huddled in the corner. "Are you Treymas?" The man nodded somberly. "Where is King Leofric staying?"

Treymas gestured a bit aimlessly. "He and the family are in a house east of town."

"How do we get there?"

"Take the main road out of town. You can't miss it."

Han glanced up at Chewbacca. "Chewie, we're gonna need a speeder."

I already have one.

"Good." Solo then looked back at Treymas. "Don't worry, we'll get the Princess back."

"Good luck." Treymas seemed to curl up into a tighter ball.

Chewbacca helped his captain up to his feet. Solo swayed a little, but after a few seconds, he was able to walk unassisted without threatening to kiss the floor. He and Chewbacca made their way out to the street where their speeder was waiting. The rain had stopped.

Solo automatically headed for the driver's seat, but Chewbacca gently steered him toward the other side. *I'll drive. You recover.*

Solo didn't argue. He slumped down in the passenger seat, one hand to his throbbing temple. He would have to sleep this off.

"I don't get it, Chewie," Han remarked as Chewbacca threw the speeder into gear. "Why did he drag us into this? Why didn't he just accept the charter? Pulling this stupid trick probably would have been easier that way."

Who knows? Chewbacca replied. *I'm sort of surprised that you want to help get Talleyana back.*

Han grimaced. "She's a royal pain in the ass, but she doesn't deserve to be kidnapped." He paused, glancing out the window. "Spanked, maybe, but not kidnapped."

* * *

As Treymas had said, it wasn't difficult to find King Leofric's house. Solo pushed the call button on the security grid next to the gate. Almost immediately, the image of a frazzled man popped up on the video monitor. "What is it?" he asked.

"My name is Han Solo. I was hired on Meridan by Shadron Derlock to bring Princess Talleyana here. She was just hijacked from me--"

"We know that already!" the man interrupted him. "What do you want?"

"I'd like to see the King."

"Do you have any identification?"

Solo dug in his vest pocket for his I.D. papers--his real ones--and held them up to the screen so that the man could read them.

"Come in," the man said.

The gate slid open, allowing Solo and Chewbacca to step inside. They followed the path up to the house and were immediately ushered inside by a royal guard. They finally ended up in a large but sparsely furnished room, with just a few chairs and a desk decorating its area. Not even paintings or tapestries hung on the smooth white walls.

"Captain Solo?" a voice queried.

Han glanced across the room and saw someone entering the room from a door at the opposite end. This man might have been dressed in simple peasant clothes, but it was obvious from his face and his bearing that he was anything but a peasant. He had an aristocratic face, finely sculptured, and not one that had suffered prolonged exposure to the elements. His brown hair, despite being slightly on the long side, was neatly cut and styled, and his beard was trimmed with equal precision. This head was perched upon a similarly well-formed body, tall and lean, a body which moved with grace and confidence. This had to be King Leofric.

"Yes," Solo replied to the King's question. He gestured to Chewbacca and introduced him.

"I am Leofric deMorga," the King said in a cultured voice, "Talleyana's father."

Solo shook the King's proffered hand. "I'm sorry about what happened. I guess I should've been more careful."

"Do not blame yourself, Captain. It probably would have happened to anyone."

The Corellian found himself thinking that the Princess must have taken after her mother when it came to her personality; the King was simply too polite to have spawned such a pain in the thrusters.

"I suppose the plan with the independent pilots was not such a good idea after all," Leofric went on. "But everyone else arrived here without any problems."

Solo chose not to comment. Instead, he asked, "Have you heard from Templar yet?"

"You know the man who has Talleyana?"

"He's an old friend of mine. Well, he *was*." Solo then proceeded to tell the King what had led up to this moment--omitting, of course, Talleyana's aggravating behavior. There was no need to burden Leofric's mind right now. It might make him reluctant to pay the ransom.

"Oh, dear," Leofric commented. "All I have heard from him so far is that he has Talleyana. He said that he would contact me again soon with his demands."

"I'd like to help you in whatever way I can, Your Majesty."

The King appeared to be taken aback by the proposal. "That is not necessary, Captain, I--"

"Please. I lost the Princess, so I'd like to have a hand in getting her back."

In the midst of this tense situation, Leofric actually smiled. "Thank you, Captain Solo," he said. "I have known you for only the barest amount of time, but you strike me as an honorable man, and a capable one, too. Perhaps having someone like you assisting me will give me the ability to feel a bit more secure. It might calm my wife as well. She is quite frantic, as I am sure you can imagine." He smiled again, this time in a somewhat sheepish manner. "I do not know if you experienced it, but Talleyana can be a very difficult person. Still, she is our daughter, and we will do anything to get her back."

"I can understand that," Solo replied, judging that to be all that was necessary to say.

The comm system on the desktop buzzed for attention, causing the King to jump almost imperceptibly. It also caused the heretofore silent Chewbacca to growl; it was quite obvious that Jarek Templar would always be a sore subject for him from now on.

King Leofric moved to the desk and depressed a button in the comm system. "Yes?"

"Good afternoon, Your Majesty!" Templar's voice filtered through the speaker. "I have someone here who'd like to say something to you."

There was a pause, then another voice spoke to the King. Talleyana's voice. "Daddy, help me!" she pleaded. "I want to come home!"

"Talley! Are you all right? Have they hurt you?"

Templar came back on the line. "Don't worry, she's just fine. I know damn well that you won't pay full price for damaged goods."

The hand that the King was resting on the desktop clenched into a fist, the knuckles whitening almost immediately. Templar sure knew how to make friends in a very effective way.

"Now, about that full price," Templar continued. "It's one hundred thousand credits. Unmarked and untraceable, of course."

The amount didn't seem to faze Leofric. "All right."

"You will deliver it to me at oh-nine-hundred tomorrow morning on the bluff overlooking Teesar. No gas or dye pellets, no homing devices in the money, no weapons, no security. And no Imps--but I know we don't have to worry about that one. Just you and the money, that's all. And I want safe passage off of Canobia. I don't want to get my money only to be waylaid in my ship."

There was a tablet of paper on the desktop; Solo grabbed it, along with a nearby writing stylus, and quickly scribbed a note which he held up for Leofric to see. *ONE CONDITION: HIM ONLY. NO BACK-UP.*

The King took the cue neatly. "On one condition," he told Templar. "It is just you and my daughter. You do not bring any friends along."

"You are in no position to make demands!"

Leofric glanced up at Han, who gestured at him as if to say, *Push it as far as you can.* Leofric appeared doubtful, but his voice was still strong and confident as he said, "Either you accept this condition, or else I cannot assure you safe passage off this planet."

Templar finally relented. "Oh, all right. Oh-nine-hundred, tomorrow morning." Then the comm went dead.

For once, King Leofric seemed to droop. Solo asked him, "Can you get that many credits here that fast?"

"We have enough in the treasury to cover it. It is not that much of a problem."

The Corellian felt his heart drop into his boots. He had never seen that many credits in one place before. Since his was a day-to-day existence, living from one charter to another, he may have seen a couple thousand here or even twenty thousand there, but one hundred thousand was an amount that he had seen only in his dreams. This must have been one hell of a treasury.

"I do not care about the money," Leofric remarked. "I just want my daughter back."

"I want to be the one to deliver the ransom," Solo said.

"But he specified me!" the King protested. "If you show up, it could endanger Talleyana's life!"

"Don't worry. I know Templar. I know how to handle him. And I'll make sure that nothing happens to your daughter."

Leofric was indecisive for a few more seconds, then he finally made up his mind. "Very well. As I said earlier, despite the fact that I do not know you very well, I find myself having confidence in you. But I warn you, if anything happens to Talleyana--"

Solo held up an interrupting hand. "Nothing will happen. Trust me!"

* * *

After the rain of the previous day, this new day was turning out to be a warm and muggy one, even at that time in the morning. Solo was up on the bluff overlooking Teesar, sitting on the leather briefcase that held the ransom and idly watching the bustle of life down in the port city.

Despite the tension in the royal family, Solo had been treated to a somewhat lavish dinner the night before. *Probably to make sure I don't faint from hunger while making the exchange,* he wryly thought. It was obvious that Queen Melina was under a severe strain, but like her husband, she was bearing up quite well. Talleyana had inherited her mother's looks, but she certainly hadn't inherited her mother's poise and gentle demeanor. Neither of the other two children behaved like their sister either, so the source of the Princess's saucy behavior was still a mystery. Bad genes? *Maybe she was adopted,* Solo considered.

Convincing Chewbacca to stay with the family at the King's house this morning was a difficult job, but the Wookiee finally relented. Despite the fact that Templar was playing dirty, they had to tread very carefully; after all, a young girl's life was at stake. Suddenly, the noise of a scattering rock brought Han out of his reverie, alert as Templar made his way up to the rendezvous point.

"Solo? What the hell are your doing here?" He was holding Talleyana's left arm in a vice-like grip, causing her to wince in moderate pain. She appeared to be all right--except for the fact that one of her eyes was blackened. Most likely she had been mouthing off, causing Templar to hit her. If that were the case, Solo could sympathize, but he sure couldn't condone the action. It only made him angrier.

"The King agreed to let me deliver the ransom," Solo informed Templar as he rose to his feet.

Nearly faster than the eye could see, Templar ripped the blaster free of his holster, pulled Talleyana closer, and pressed the muzzle against her forehead. She whimpered in pure terror.

"The King broke the rules," Templar said. "Maybe I ought to splatter his precious daughter's brains all over you so that you can take them home to His Majesty."

"Wait, Jarek, wait." Solo tried to stay calm. He pointed to his hip; this was one of those rare occasions when it wasn't burdened by his holster. "Look, no blaster. I don't even know where it is. For all I know, one of your goons still has it." He held his vest open. "Nothing hidden here." He lifted up the vest to show that there was no blaster tucked away at the small of his back. "Nothing here either. And there's no Chewie around. I'm by myself."

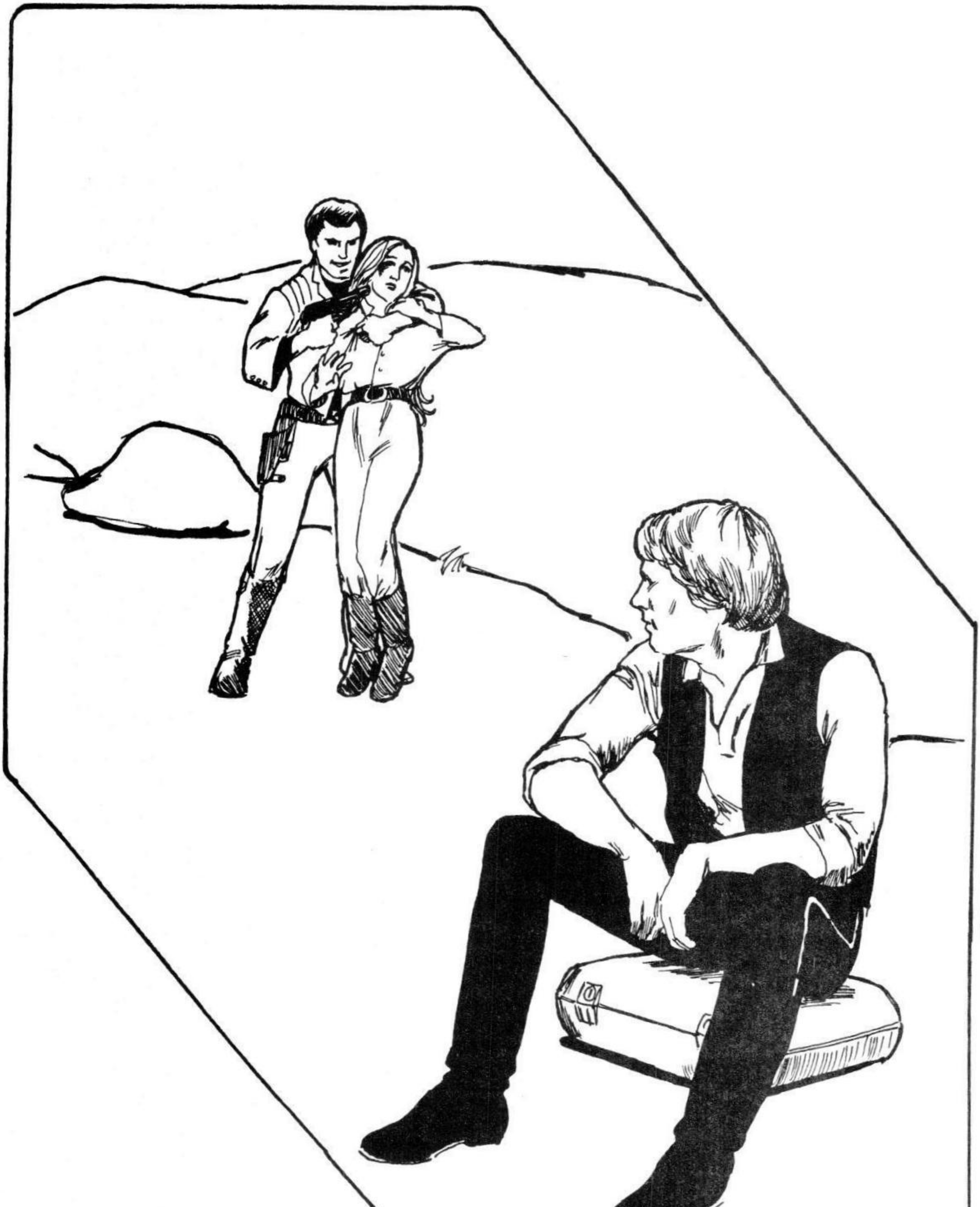
Templar was about three-quarters convinced. "Why so noble all of a sudden, Han?"

"I've always been noble. You just never noticed."

Templar laughed. "Bullshit!"

Solo gave him a coy smile. "Actually, it's because you heisted her right out from under my nose. I felt like it was up to me to get her back."

"Oh, how very touching."


DANI

"Plus, I just wanted to let you know that you may be getting safe passage off this planet, but someday, when you least expect it, I'm gonna be right behind you, and I'm gonna make sure you pay for this. You give smugglers a bad name."

"You don't frighten me, Solo," Templar responded simply. But the nervous spark in his eyes showed that he knew Solo was serious and that he didn't appreciate having such knowledge.

Suddenly Talleyana entered the conversation. "Just cut the crap, Solo," she hissed, "and give the man his money!"

Templar grinned. "That's a good idea. The money, Han. Now."

Solo picked up the briefcase. "Okay, Jarek." Before Templar realized what he was doing, the Corellian threw the case up in the air; despite the fact that it was quite heavy, Solo had given it enough thrust to send it to quite an altitude.

The action had the desired effect. Templar looked up and let go of Talleyana's arm, giving her the opportunity to scamper away. Solo then rushed Templar, causing both of them to tumble to the ground. The tactic worked much better than it had at the Golden Krayt Inn. When Templar hit bottom, his blaster popped out of his hand and skittered away. The two men then tussled violently, coming very close to falling over the edge of the bluff once. Finally, Solo scrambled to his feet, followed closely by Templar. Their faces were both smeared with dirt and blood; each man had landed his share of punches.

"Damn it, Solo," Templar snarled, "I should've killed you at the inn!"

"Well, you didn't, so you only have to face kidnapping and extortion charges," Solo answered.

With an enraged shout, Templar ran toward Solo, fully prepared to slaughter the Corellian with his bare hands. A stone got in his way; he stumbled over it, almost falling, but his momentum still carried him forward. Han neatly sidestepped him, allowing him to crash headfirst into the ground. Templar sprawled in the dirt, moaning in definite pain.

Solo limped to Templar's side. "Had enough?" he asked.

As if he were powered by booster rockets, Templar suddenly leaped up, his head solidly butting Solo in the stomach. With a comical "Oof!", Solo doubled over, nearly retching from the pain and the sudden loss of breath. Templar maneuvered around the Corellian and kicked him squarely in the backside, sending Solo down to make better friends with the dirt.

When Solo finally rolled over, he found himself facing Templar's blaster. "Nice try, Han, but not good enough," Templar said.

As Templar's finger began squeezing the trigger, Han was thinking, *You're such a chump, Solo.*

Suddenly there was a strange noise, sort of like something heavy striking a melon. Templar's eyes rolled back in his head, and without a word, he collapsed. His absence revealed Talleyana, with the case full of credits still held over her head.

"I did it!" she shrieked. "I did it!"

Solo propped himself up on one elbow. "You sure did."

As if just remembering he was there, she dropped the briefcase and ran to him, kneeling down beside him. "Are you all right? Oh, you're bleeding!" She began poking him in the stomach. "And he hit you right here! That must have *hurt*!"

Not as much as her poking did. "Stop that," Solo said threateningly, "or else I'm going to throw up."

She immediately pulled away. "Yuck! Don't you dare!"

"Do you know how to drive a landspeeder?" he then asked.

"Of course I do!" She thrust her lower lip out in a pout, showing that she considered his question to be a personal insult.

Solo dug in his breast pocket and pulled out a key. Handing it to the Princess, he told her, "I've got a speeder parked at the bottom of the hill. Bring it up here so that we can load this guy in it and take him back to face your father."

Talleyana grinned in anticipation. "Yeah, and is he ever going to be sorry!"

As she trotted away and disappeared down the path that led to the bottom of the bluff, Solo laid back on the hard ground, letting the sunshine wash over him. *You may be a chump, Solo, but you're a damn lucky one.*

* * *

"I really wish that you would stay with us, Captain Solo. Let your injuries heal."

Solo gave King Leofric a grateful glance. "Thank you, Your Majesty, but I'm not hurt that bad. I'll be fine."

"Very well. My entire family certainly appreciates all the help you gave us."

"I'm just glad I could be of help. And I appreciate the fact that the Princess saved my life. It wasn't really something that I expected from her."

Leofric smiled warmly and nodded. "Yes, Talleyana is a difficult child, but she certainly is not passive." He slid the top drawer of his desk open and extracted a sack that appeared to be quite heavy. "Here is the balance we owe you. And there is a little extra for your troubles. Ten thousand."

"Ten thousand?" he echoed, started. "I can't..."

The King came out from behind his desk and laid his hands on Solo's shoulders in an appreciative, brotherly gesture. "Han, you brought my daughter back to me without losing a cent, and you were injured in the process. Nothing I do can possibly show my appreciation, so at least accept this token and my thanks."

Some token. "Well, if you insist."

Leofric smiled in amusement. "I do. You are a very noble man, Captain Solo. The Rebel Alliance could use someone like you."

"Well, ah, I don't know," the Corellian hemmed and hawed. Finally, he said, "Maybe they could use me, but I don't think they'd really want me."

"I see. But do me a favor and consider it someday, will you?"

"Yes, I will." Solo was lying through his teeth.

* * *

Thanks to the King's generosity, Solo and Chewbacca were able to buy some sorely needed supplies in Teesar. Solo was about to carry the last box up into the *Millennium Falcon* when someone entered the docking bay.

"Han?"

He turned around to find Talleyana approaching him. She seemed to be quite recovered from her ordeal.

"I wanted to catch you before you go," she said, "because I didn't have a chance to thank you properly for saving me. That was a very brave thing for you to do."

Solo could hardly believe what he was hearing. Talleyana was actually being nice! Perhaps her experience had had a positive side to it. "Well, we're even," he told her. "You were pretty brave there yourself. I'd be dead if it weren't for you."

"Yes, that's true," she mused. "But you know what? I never would have been in that situation if it weren't for you. It's all your fault!"

Now Solo *really* couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What? Are you kidding me?"

"No, I'm not joking! If you had been smarter, you would've known that something was wrong! And you would've taken care of that creep right away. But, no, you just had to let yourself get shot so that they could take me."

"Hold it right there! I--"

"No, I will not hold it! It's your fault, and you know it! Do you know what that creep did to me? He hit me! I wish Daddy was turning him over to the Empire instead of letting these Canobian jerks take care of him. They'll probably say, 'Naughty boy!' and let him go. The morons!"

Talleyana fixed him with a critical gaze. "You're such an idiot, Han. I don't know what I ever saw in you. I should've let that guy blow you away. It would have saved us all a lot of trouble." With a sigh, she turned away and headed toward the door. "But what does it matter? Sooner or later someone will put you out of your misery."

As she passed through the door, Solo shook his head as if there were rocks rattling around in it. That girl had had a blaster pointed at her head and it still hadn't done anything to change her behavior! Okay, maybe he had been a little sloppy. Maybe he could have done something to prevent her kidnapping. Or maybe not. But he sure as hell didn't deserve the upbraiding that she had just given him. Part of him wanted to go after her and kick her royal little bottom, but he couldn't do that after her father had been so generous to him. *Or could I?*

Han? Chewbacca called down from the *Falcon*'s main hold. *Did I just hear voices?*

"Yeah," Solo replied. He picked up the last crate of supplies and trudged up the ship's ramp. "Chewie, remind me never to get involved with a princess again."

The ramp rose, closing up the ship and concealing whatever reply Chewbacca might have given.

Fireside Soliloquy

Ain't never been an angel.
Train robber, bank robber;
Never shot a man that didn't try to kill me.
Never took a woman who didn't want me to.
Never thought o' God
Till I met this crazy rabbi.
He took care of me real good.
Took that bullet out quick and clean,
Just like I showed him. Didn't hurt at all.
(Well, maybe a bit. Too drunk to tell.)
Gonna marry a woman he ain't never seen. (Cute little
thing, but she don't have big--just yawnin', Rabbi.)
Caught him a trout, he saved my life--
Maybe he's my angel.
Damn. Maybe.

-- **Elaine Christiani**

INDIANA WANTS ME

Indiana wants me,
Oh, must I go in there?
I can hear him calling.
Bet it's dirty in there.
(Should have gone to Delhi when I had the chance.)

Oh, my God, there's something scrunchy on the ground.
I can hear you call,
And I can hear a low, rumbling sound.
I'm on my way. Look, can't you wait?
There's two dead people here--what's that you say?
I've had enough of you two! It's dark.
I should've never listened to you.

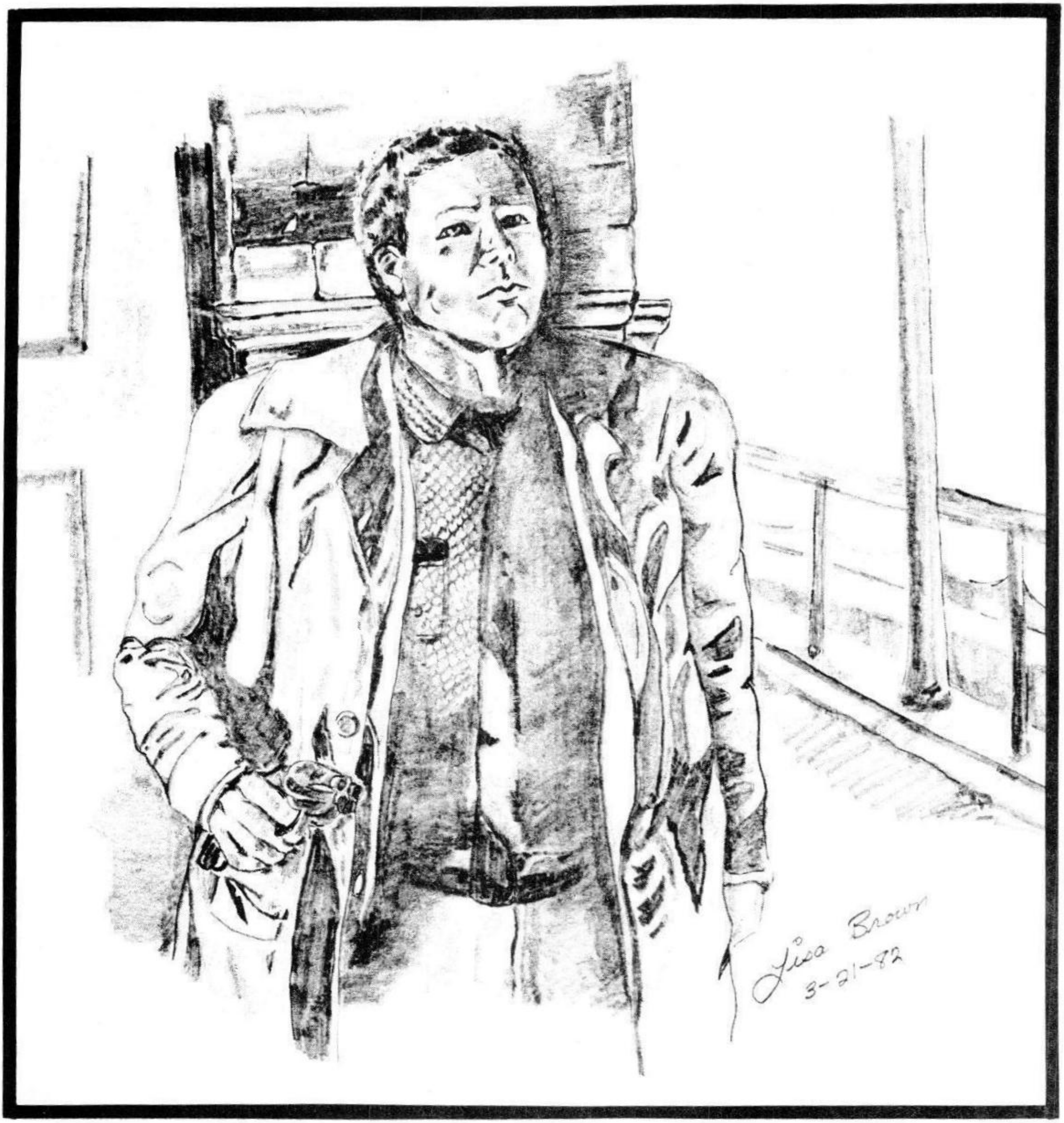
Indiana wants me.
My God, there's bugs everywhere!
Please, Shorty, let me in.
Indy, they're all in my hair!
(Wish I'd gone to Delhi when I had the chance.)

He's shouting something about a hole in the wall.
Put my hand in? Are you kidding?
Haven't you seen all the bugs there are?
(Bet he wouldn't do it!)
ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT! Ugh! Hey, Indy, I think I got it!
Now, for God's sake, do something for me.
Indy, won't you get these bugs off me?

Indiana wants me.
Okay, there's no need to shout!
Oh, my God, the ceiling's falling!
Now he's pushing me out.
(I'm gonna go to Delhi soon as I get the chance!)

-- Jeanna Falk --

Adapted from 'Indiana Wants Me'
Sung by R. Dean Taylor



Lisa Brown
3-21-82

THOUGHTS TO THE DRIPPING OF RAIN

Echoes in an empty stairway;
Footsteps plodding in the rain.
These are the symbols of my life.
Cold bleakness is my domain.

One of us may yet be alive
When this night's work is done.
I kill replicants. It's my job.
One of us will live; just one.

It might not have mattered to me
Only a few days ago . . .
Did I change or did they change me?
And how will I ever know?

I'd learned to feel nothing at all.
I'd taught myself not to care.
Now hope betrays all my wisdom . . .
Rachel. Is Rachel still there?

JACQUELINE TAERO

DN
DANI

BILL OF FARE

ILLUSTRATED BY
DANI

Elaine Christiani

"Give me your hat."

"Why?"

"'Cause I'm gonna puke in it...ohh!"

Short Round snatched back his precious Yankees cap, leaving Willie the unpleasant option of retching into her own brocaded lap. Sweat glittered amongst the gems on her brow; clutching the edge of the table, her eyes blurred as course followed unpalatable course.

Smack in the middle of a bat-infested jungle, Pankot Palace had been a beautiful vision--with a young, unmarried maharajah thrown in--but her dream of life as a pampered maharani had turned to dust, like the village they'd left. The maharajah wouldn't be interested in girls for awhile yet; Indy was still after those rocks; and if some decent food appeared on this table, she wouldn't be able to keep it down!

Sitting crosslegged, her gown felt an inch too tight, cutting into her queasy midriff. She shot an anguished look at Indy, but he was talking with Chatter Lal and eating soup, calmly pushing aside the eyeballs that bobbed in his bowl as if they were marshmallows in hot chocolate.

But watching him steadied her stomach somewhat. He'd dressed for dinner in a tweed jacket and bow tie, managing to look scholarly though he'd forgotten to shave. The stubble shone like gold in the candlelight as he leaned forward, elbows on white linen, all his attention for the prime minister.

Nausea struck again, stabbing low in her belly. Willie groaned, unheard. Her eyes burned, stomach tossing like a ship at sea. If she didn't get out of here *quick...*

The guest across from her sighed with relish. "Chilled monkey brains!"

A servant placed the dessert in front of her, then lifted its hairy scalp to reveal the crystalline mess within. Willie's eyes rolled up to the ceiling and went blank. She fainted...

She made no sound when she fell--the cushions and conversation prevented that--but Indy, who'd glanced her way at that moment, saw her tilt backwards. His spoon fell into his soup. "Willie--!"

The music stopped. Turbaned heads swiveled. Lal snapped his fingers and attendants rushed forward. One of them, bigger and burlier than the rest, had the singer in his arms before Indy could rise.

But he recovered quickly. "Wait! I'll take her." He came around the table and scooped Willie to his chest. He managed to bow with his blonde burden, and the young maharajah nodded in dismissal.

The big servant preceded Indy to Willie's suite. A waiting-woman, her red sari vivid against the pale blue decor, materialized from a dim corner. Flowers and sandalwood scented the air.

Indy laid Willie on the bed. His hand was trapped between the mattress and her back when she stirred, lids fluttering. He found the rear fastening of her gown and undid it, then gently removed the gold-trimmed veil and headdress. Her head lolled on the pillow, one borrowed earring brushing her cheek. The maid removed the jewels and took them with the veil to be put away. Willie moved again, and blinked up at him. "Indy?"

"Relax." He sat beside her. "You'll be all right."

She *did* feel better. The awful pressure was gone. This room was cool and dim, its delicate colors easy on her eyes. Then she cringed, remembering what had happened downstairs. Some maharani.

"*Willie...*" Indy touched her shoulder. "Forget it. Try to sleep."

"Like on the plane, huh?"

He gave her that infuriating, sideswept smile. "Yeah, Doll. Like the plane."

She moaned, rubbing her stomach. "Where did *that* get us?"

The smile became a brief grin; then Indiana turned to the woman, who had watched and listened to this exchange with cool disinterest. "Would you look after her, please?" he asked in her tongue.

Her eyes widened with new respect, and she nodded. Over her dusky arm was folded a pair of blue pajamas and a matching robe, both several sizes too large. Willie'd love that! With another grin, he left the suite.

At the banquet he reassured the guests about Miss Scott's condition, then adroitly changed the subject. Bowls of fruit had been put on the table and Indy pulled one near; further down, Short Round was tucking in an apple and a banana close at hand. Indy anticipated Willie's delight at the gift; maybe he'd cinch her gratitude by visiting the royal kitchens and making sure she'd get a suitable breakfast...

He looked at his fellow diners. The majority of them were well stuffed, sitting back and enjoying the show as the dancers performed their routine. It was a real switch from chorus girls in coolie hats and silver lamé! But Chatter Lal went on nibbling, along with his sovereign. Indy peeled and sectioned an orange, then absently popped a wedge into his mouth, his mind busy. He'd found more questions than answers at Pankot Palace, and his misgivings about the place had intensified since their arrival. As lowly tombs held great riches, danger and treachery could be veiled by power and beauty.

He ate his orange, the bespectacled, shadowed face showing nothing of the wheels turning within. He'd carried Willie to make certain she ended up in her chamber, and it wasn't just her hunger--or his--that prodded him to visit later bearing a bowl of fruit.

The dark light.

Was it here?

HOW DO YOU TELL A FRIEND?

Save your strength, Chewie.
Store it away for another time.
Sooner or later we knew this would happen,
After living so long on the line.

I pushed my luck too far this time,
With Jabba and his gang.
But still, we wouldn't be here now,
If my friend Lando hadn't sang!

Well, take care of the princess for me, pal.
She needs tender loving care.
Keep an eye on her to make sure she's safe.
To her, life's been so unfair.

And do your best to reassure her,
If ever she might be in pain,
That even though I can't be with her,
Her love for me wasn't in vain.

Help me, Chewie, to find the words.
I know my being speechless is rare.
I have so much to say to you both,
But how do I tell friends that I care?

-- *Susan Zahn*

THE PARTING

I've tried real hard to understand
What it is you want from me,
And I'm starting to be afraid
That I'll never make you see.

Robbing a train, sometimes a bank,
Surviving out in the snow,
Saving my skin from hostile folk --
That's the kind of stuff I know.

I've got no learning out of books,
But I've got a kind of skill.
I know the look of minted gold,
The face on the dollar bill.

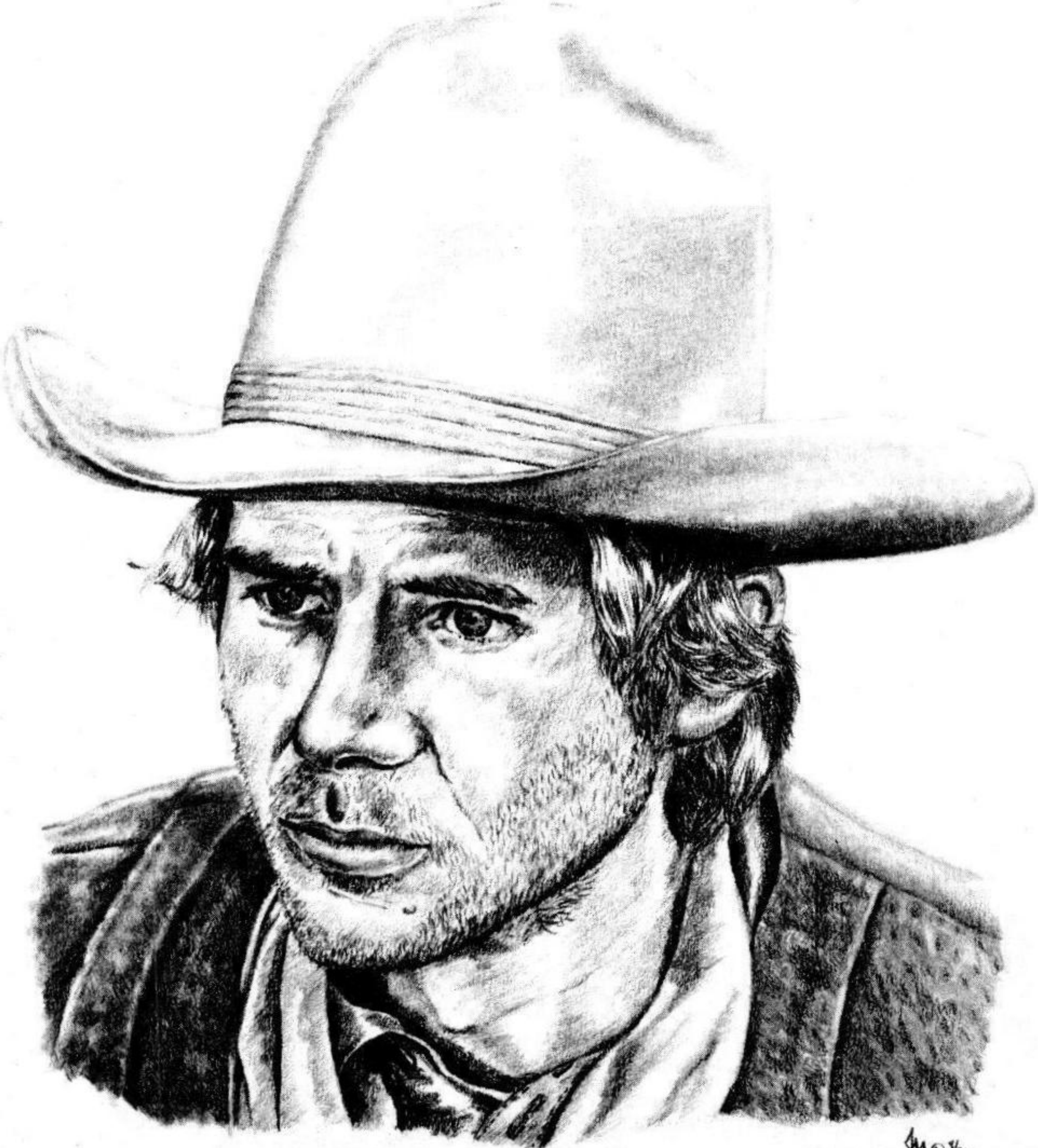
You're my best friend but all the same,
We're different as day from night.
I can't be what you think I should,
And asking it isn't right.

Me, I'd never up and marry
A woman I never saw;
I don't think I'd be any good
At living life by the law.

I'm going back to what I know.
I'll get by as best I can.
But I'm just not cut out to be
What you'd call an honest man.

Jacqueline Taero

ILLUSTRATED BY
JIM MARKLE



JM © 8/82

Ever Had One Of Those Days ...?

The city was Shanghai; the club, Obi-Wan
I was up on the stage and singing my song
Up to this night, my life had been fairly tame
'Til one man came in--Indiana Jones was his name.

I went to Lao's table once my song was done
Seeing him sitting with his two sons plus one--
A man dressed in white with a scar on his chin
Introductions were made and my luck began to tailspin.

Before I knew what was happening, I was caught in this mess
Getting jabbed with a fork that put holes in my dress
Jones demanded a diamond, for what I didn't know
"I suggest you give me what you owe me--or anything goes."

Lao took out the diamond with a scowl on his face
Doctor Jones removed the fork, shoved me back to my place
I grumbled and growled at this man in a tux
Deciding that the gem he held was worth lots of bucks.

The remains of Nurhachi were the diamond's return
Ashes of a dead king in a jade-sculpted urn
'All this for some ashes?' I thought with some shock
Then tried to find a way to get ahold of that rock.

Jones finished his drink once toasting the dead man
Gulping champagne that'd been poisoned by Lao's son, Kao Kan
Lao took out the antidote which he'd force Indy to buy
If he didn't return the diamond, he surely would die.

But Che was a gangster who'd lie, cheat, and steal
I had a sneaking feeling that he wouldn't complete this deal
He wanted to see this archeologist die in a heap at his feet
Jones realized that now and rose from his seat.

Indiana didn't appreciate this one little bit
And grabbed the nearest weapon--a flame-bearing spit
He heaved it at Chen with precise markman's aim
Lao screamed for his assassins and howled Indy's name.

The antidote and the diamond then fell to the floor
And were kicked as panicked diners raced for the door
I ignored the fighting around me, going for that stone
A bucket of ice fell on top of it--I let out a moan.

Scrabbling for the diamond, I found the antidote instead
Indy yelled "Stay there!" to me as bullets flew at his head
Needing some type of shield, he cut loose a gong
It fell to the floor with a loud ringing bong.

I looked up to see that my end was in sight
I'd be crushed by a gong--oh, boy, what a night!
Jones saved me from becoming a gong-flattened mass
We ran toward the windows and crashed through the glass.

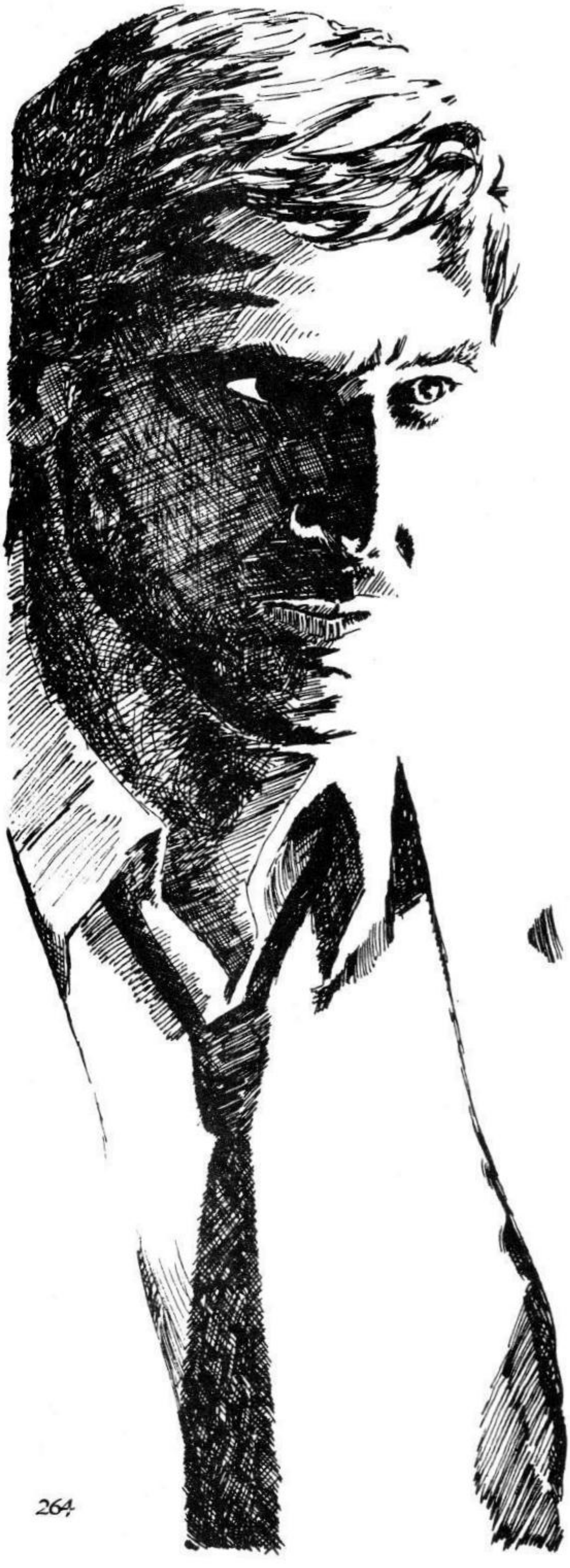
Through awning after awning we fell and I screamed
This night was like nothing that I'd ever dreamed
After one final jolt, we landed in a car's back seat
With a driver who thought our entrance was neat.

"Wow! Holy smoke! Crash landing!" said he
While grinning at Indiana first, then smirking at me
"Short Round, step on it!" Jones yelled to the kid
"Okey dokey, Doctor Jones!" and that's what he did.

We had a wild ride through the streets of Shanghai
Every other moment I was sure I would die
Somehow we got to the airport without fail
We have to travel with what? Aw, damn, I cracked a nail.

So now here I am, flying to only God-knows-where
With holes in my dress and feathers in my hair
This never would've happened in Missouri but I just had to stray
Why do I get the feeling that this isn't my day...?

Jill Thomas



LETHAL

ILLUSTRATED BY
DANI

"One hand washes the other, Book," McCafferty grinned. "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours."

John Book repressed a wince. The Deputy Chief was inordinately fond of clichés. If one didn't rise readily to his lips, he'd track it down and wrestle it into submission.

"C'mon, Mike," Book urged. "You're being an asshole. Why won't you let me go back into Homicide?"

"Because you're doing a great job in Internal Affairs, that's why. After all, busting Schaeffer and the rest was a terrific piece of work --"

"Which was three years ago." Book shifted in the straight-backed chair that McCafferty reserved for the underlings. "Besides, I've had my fill of dirty cops. I want to get back on the street with the drug dealers and serial murderers. At least I'd be meeting a higher grade of felon."

As always, the mention of Schaeffer gave him a twinge. After all, he and the ex-Deputy Chief had been friends for a long time--at least until Book had discovered that his old mentor was wrapped up in a $22 million drug scheme. Book had taken a bullet in the side and been forced to hide out with a beautiful Amish widow until Schaeffer and his two cohorts had found him. Book tried not to think much about those days; some wounds were too deep to heal quickly. But now Schaeffer was doing thirty-to-life and his pals, McFee and Ferguson, were feeding daisies, and Book had

WITNESS

Cypher

never been able to get the bad taste out of his mouth. It was just one of several things that sometimes made him consider chucking the whole Philadelphia Police Department and going into honest work, like rolling back the mileage meters on used cars.

But McCafferty wasn't about to let go. "Okay, that was a while back. But the Army of Liberty thing --"

"Doesn't reflect much credit on the department," Book interrupted.

McCafferty shrugged. "One bad apple--or, in this case, seven--can ruin the whole barrel. Your investigation was flawless, John, and the results were just what the department needed."

"And Sampson took a vertical walk out a twentieth-floor window," Book growled. The bad taste was intensifying.

"Yeah, that was too bad about Sampson," McCafferty said. *Damn,* Book thought, *the son of a bitch actually sounds like he means it.*

But he wouldn't let the Deputy Chief off the hook. "And Cooney and LaBatt and Howe and Rosenheim and Henderson took early retirement at the 'suggestion' of the force --"

"They were at fault, John."

"And Mettler took the fall officially." *Mettler at least deserved what he got,* he added to himself.

McCafferty sighed. "John, John, you're letting all this get to you. You need to buck up, to look on the bright side --"

If he tells me to look for the silver lining, Book thought viciously, *I'll find it and ram it up his supercilious ass.*

But McCafferty said nothing about linings, silver or otherwise. Instead, Book noticed, his superior was running a manicured fingernail down the spine of a thick manila folder on his meticulously kept desktop. Finally, he looked Book dead in the eye. "As I said before: You scratch my back--and I'll let you transfer to Homicide."

"Just what kind of scratch do you have in mind?"

McCafferty grinned. "A new partner."

Book groaned and slumped back in the chair. "Oh, no! Not again! Those last two incompetent assholes you dumped on me --"

"Were handicapped from the word go by your memories of Elton Carter," McCafferty interrupted sharply. Then his voice softened. "John, I know you and Carter were friends, and it's a damned shame that Schaeffer had him taken out. But to blame his successors for incompetence --"

"Is entirely justified." Book's anger, never more than a millimeter beneath the surface, manifested in a flushing of the face, a narrowing of the deep-set hazel eyes. "The first one, that peachfuzz kid Oliver, must've found his badge in a Cap'n Crunch box. The one time I needed him for backup, he dropped his gun. Not that it mattered, since he'd forgotten to load it."

"Well, maybe Oliver was a little inexperienced --"

"Then," Book continued inexorably, "you dumped Zakov on me. Zakov! Not only does Zakov think the sun rises and sets in Ralph Lauren, but I catch him running a nice little black market in Philadelphia P.D. uniforms! Who's next in the partner parade--Gomer Pyle?" By now, Book's face was a deep red and his large hands, clenched into fists, pounded the arms of the chair.

"Calm down, John! Please!" McCafferty sounded alarmed, and Book realized that he'd been ready to launch himself across the desk at his boss. That kind of thing didn't go down well with superiors. They tended to take it personally, which spelled the loss of a cop's twenty-year pension, or at least some very nasty notes in his permanent file. With an effort, Book dragged in a deep breath, let it out slowly, and forced himself to slide back in the chair. He stared at the chipped spot on the front of the desk where, departmental legend had it, a disgruntled patrolman had planted his size thirteen lace-up brogan after being denied a detective's shield.

His silence stretched out so long that it penetrated even McCafferty's accustomed imperturbability. Finally, the Deputy Chief sighed, "John, please. I know you've had--well, problems with your past couple of partners. But this guy isn't the slightest bit incompetent. He's a sergeant of detectives with plenty of experience. In fact," he laughed a little self-consciously, "he's supposed to be something of a supercop. He's on loan from L.A. as a kind of goodwill gesture between the departments. He'll be here six months, and we wanted to give L.A.'s finest the best partner we could line up. And that," he grinned hopefully, "is Captain John Book."

Book looked up, his face full of suspicion. "What the hell is a Los Angeles cop doing in Philadelphia, Mike? Why does L.A.P.D. want to get rid of him, if he's as hot as you say?"

McCafferty waved the folder. "John, look at the guy's file! He's a regular one-man army! He knocked out a couple of the biggest drug rings on the West Coast and wrapped up three very nasty homicides."

If a gaze could speak volumes, Book's spoke encyclopedias. McCafferty stuttered, then sputtered to a halt. Book continued to stare.

"All right, all right!" McCafferty sank back into his swivel chair, tossing up his beefy, well-tended hands. "Okay, so he's had a little trouble. His partner got invalided out of the force a month ago after a shooting and L.A.P.D. says our hero blames himself. Apparently, they think he may be suicidal --"

"Great." Book's voice was as dry as Carry Nation's liquor locker. "So you saddle me with some nut case who's gonna self-destruct. Why don't they just give him a psycho pension and unload the whole problem?"

"Because he's the best they've got, and they think if he can get away for a while --"

"To Philadelphia, where if he eats his gun or blows away some innocent bystander, they won't have to deal with the mess." Looking at McCafferty, Book might have been eyeing a slug on a hot sidewalk. "And how come *we* get this lunatic?"

"He's not a lunatic, John. Ed Murphy says --"

The name closed a circuit in Book's brain, where echoes of office gossip resounded. "Wait a minute. Murphy--L.A.P.D. Homicide captain, right? Who's got a kid your daughter's dating?" McCafferty shifted in discomfort. "Yeah, I think I heard about this, Mike. Your daughter--Carmen's her name?--is at U.C.L.A. with his boy and they want to get married, right? So what's the problem?"

McCafferty sighed. "The problem is that he's underage--some kind of mental whiz, got into college way early--and Murphy won't sign the papers. Unless I take his dynamite detective off his hands for six months."

Book shrugged. "So let 'em wait 'til he's legal. Why're you pushing for the marriage, anyway?"

McCafferty buried his head in his hands. "Because," he said in a muffled voice, "pretty soon she's gonna start to show, if you must know, and neither Carmen or her mother is ever gonna consider an abortion."

Book's head snapped up. "So because your daughter got screwed, you're gonna screw *me*?"

McCafferty didn't even rise to the insult. "John, you're the best we've got," he implored. "I wasn't bullshitting you about that. If you can't straighten this guy out, nobody can. Just *try*. I'm desperate." A note of cunning surfaced. "And remember, you get what you want: a berth in Homicide. Deal?"

The silence dragged on until McCafferty was writhing in his padded chair. Then Book said, "Deal. And I'm going to regret this."

McCafferty's smile was spontaneous and incandescent. "No, you aren't, I promise. Here." He slid the file toward Book. "Study up; I think you'll be impressed. He starts Wednesday."

"Wednesday? That's only two days." Book's eyes glittered. "Pretty sure of me, weren't you?"

The smile faded. "No, not at all. I did tell Murphy that I was giving his hotshot to you--but I was gambling that you'd go along. I appreciate it, John; I really do." He grinned. "It'll work out, I swear. You and he'll get along like gangbusters."

"Promises, promises," Book grumbled. But he picked up the file.

* * *

Angrily, Book cut a corner with a squeal of tires and felt the flashy little Laser try to skid. He controlled in deftly, but his expression remained grim. Book usually enjoyed tearing around town in the sporty red compact that his sister, Elaine, with her usual acerbity, called his Midlife Chrysler. He'd bought the car after returning from Lancaster County, when he'd discovered that nothing could get the blood--his blood--out of the upholstery in his old sedan. Rachel Lapp had soaked the blood from his suit, but the car had been a loss. Like his hopes for a different kind of future, one with Rachel and her son...

Savagely he shook his head to chase the memory, and glanced at the still-unread file on the seat beside him. Then the car radio crackled the code every officer dreaded: "All units respond. 10-33, Provo and Hoskins." Code 10-33: officer needs help. Just a couple of blocks away. Book grabbed the bubble light with his left hand and slapped it onto the roof while with his right, he cut the little car into a sharp turn. He squealed through a pay-parking lot and across an alley. A block over he could see the winking lights of a blue-and-white parked diagonally across another alley, and a uniformed patrolman crouched behind the open driver's door. Book roared into the alley, cut the ignition and jumped out, gun in hand.

Keeping low, he called, "What you got?"

"Sniper, holed up on the second floor of that apartment building." The blue-suit waved toward a shabby fifteen-story structure fronting a littered courtyard. "An off-duty investigator apparently wandered into a drug deal and the guys opened up. He nailed three of 'em, but the fourth split into the building with a shotgun and has him pinned." His words were punctuated by gunfire. Book recognized the boom of a shotgun and the roar of an automatic.

He peered around the car, checking the layout. "Any way into the building?"

"Entrance is in the courtyard. I just got here myself; haven't had time to look for a back door."

Book slid around the back of the Laser for a better view, but the angle was wrong. Sprinting over to the blue-and-white, he ducked down behind the engine block and studied the setup.

About ninety feet away, in the middle of the courtyard, a wiry dark-haired man in old jeans and a disreputable leather jacket crouched behind a pile of broken bricks. Three male bodies sprawled nearby in attitudes that told Book their next resting place would be the city morgue. Every now and then, the man poked his automatic around the brick pile to take a shot, but it was obvious that he had no chance against the gunman firing on him from the upstairs window. The gunman was keeping well clear of the window itself, and the brick pile looked precarious at best. Even as that thought came, Book saw a glint of blued steel in the corner of the window and bricks dissolved with a boom. If the man with the shotgun had a good supply of shells, Book figured, his opponent was about to join the three drug dealers on a cold slab with a tag on his toe.

Distantly, Book's ears caught the keening of sirens. Reinforcements were en route--but he figured they wouldn't arrive in time.

Casting around, Book noticed a recessed walkway leading from the alley into the courtyard, abutting the front wall of the building. The walk, apparently a remnant of the structure's salad days, ran nearly to the front door. The gunman upstairs would have a shot at him, but the angle wasn't favorable and Book thought he just might be able to reach the door.

For a moment he considered looking for a rear entrance but a blast from the window came close to toppling the brick pile altogether. The scruffy man--a cop, he recalled--recoiled, then retaliated, emptying the automatic and slamming in a fresh magazine without wasted effort. His bullets had shattered the window frame, but apparently Shotgun was staying out of the way.

Gun in hand, Book took a deep breath. He hated to reveal himself to Shotgun, but he would have hated even more being shot mistakenly by one of his own. So he yelled, "Police officer! Police officer!" and bolted from the shelter of the blue-and-white into the recessed walkway. As he did, he heard the automatic roar and knew the scruffy cop was laying down cover for him.

The fire from the automatic was so fierce that Book reached the doorway without being fired upon from upstairs. With a kick, he slammed the door inward, nearly ripping the rotted wood from its hinges, and glanced around the darkened lobby within. A flight of stairs rose before him, angling at the landing and continuing on up to the unseen second floor. Overhead, he heard feet pounding on uncarpeted planks.

The shotgun boomed too near his ear and he slammed himself to the floor, rolling behind a ragged sofa. The gunman was firing down the stairwell--firing blind, but he'd nearly lucked out. Book's cheek stung where a splinter had hit.

Behind him he heard quick footsteps. He twisted around, gun ready. The scruffy cop burst through, automatic blazing. He halted in the middle of the lobby, sparing only a glance at the prone Book before heading toward the stairs. Book started to yell a warning, but as he did, a stocky, blond-bearded man with a twelve-gauge threw himself down to the landing, rolled into firing position and opened up with both barrels. Book emptied his thirty-eight but the roar was buried as the other cop too emptied his gun. In a moment, the shotgun came sliding down the staircase. The gunman remained on the landing, most of his head blown away.

Sirens screamed outside and Book realized that the cavalry had arrived--too late. *Good thing he'd played hero,* he thought wryly. Raising himself cautiously to his feet, he inspected the other man. "You okay?"

The scruffy cop didn't answer. His blue eyes were wide and his breath was coming in ragged gasps, the corners of his mouth dragged down in a rictus. His whole body trembled as though every instinct were warring with every other instinct--the fight-or-flight reaction taken to extremes.

For a moment, Book thought the man was having some kind of seizure. He stepped toward him, putting out his hand. "Hey, it's okay --" he began. That's when the automatic swung up and slammed across his cheekbone, and suddenly he was on the floor with a madman on top of him pummeling him and screaming, "You son of a bitch, you son of a bitch, why'd you have to butt in?"

Astonished and angry, Book rolled out from under the flailing fist. "Butt *in*? You stupid bastard, I saved your life! A couple more reloads and that guy would've blown you away!"

"I had him where I wanted him!"

Book stared. "Oh, sure. If you wanted to get yourself killed."

"Maybe that *was* what I wanted!"

The pain in that cry eclipsed Book's rage with shocking speed. Instead of reacting, therefore, he took a mental step back to study the situation and the man before him.

What he saw was someone perhaps a handful of years younger than he, with thick unruly hair growing out of a too-long-ago cut, a stubbled chin and wild eyes ringed with the shadows of sleeplessness. The clothes were at least as worn as their wearer, and at these close quarters, Book couldn't help noticing that neither the clothes nor the man inside them had been washed for some time. Putting the evidence of physical neglect together with the bizarre behavior, Book suspected that he was looking at the leading edge of madness.

Unsure how to proceed, he groped for words; but the stranger forestalled him with a grin so unexpected that it took his breath away. "Hey," the scruffy cop said, "didn't mean to get tough with you, Cochise. Help's always welcome, even though I was doing okay on my own." He rolled up to his feet with athletic grace, cluing Book that, although the surface seemed rusty, the machinery underneath was well-oiled and ready for use.

The cop tucked the automatic--a 9mm Beretta, Book noted with professional interest--into the back of his belt and dug a pack of Winstons and a lighter out of his jacket. "Hey," he said as he lit up, "I'm starving. You East Coast boys got any place around here where I can get a decent hot dog?"

"East Coast?" Book frowned, regaining his feet. Standing, he was half-a-head taller than the stranger. "The blue-suit said you were a cop. You're not one of ours?"

"Not yet." He stuck out a dirty hand. "Just hit town a couple of hours ago and walked into this little fandango here. I'm on loan from L.A.P.D. They wanted to get rid of me for a while, so they're dumping me on some poor sucker named Book." He grabbed Book's hand and pumped it firmly. "Name's Martin Riggs. I'd appreciate it if you'd show me where to get something to eat, and then tell me where to find this dumb bastard who gets saddled with me."

Book found his voice. "As for the food," he said with commendable control, "there's a diner right around the corner. And as for the dumb bastard--you just got through beating the shit out of him for saving your life." With ironic glee, he watched Riggs' jaw drop. "Welcome to Philadelphia," Book said.

* * *

"Look," Book growled around a mouthful of cheese steak, "let's get a couple of things straight. I don't have any use for some L.A. hotshot shooting up my city, understand? And I damn sure don't have any use for some psycho nut case who wants to off himself on my time. I promised McCafferty I'd wet-nurse you, but I'm not going to put my life on the line for a screwed up son of a bitch whose only ambition is to eat his gun."

"Hey, no sweat," Riggs said. "*I* got no use for Internal Affairs assholes who spend their working hours peeking through keyholes, trying to nail some poor slob who just wants to get his job done without being blown away."

Book bristled at the reference to I.A.D. "You like dirty cops?"

"I hate the fuckers." Riggs bit savagely into his third frankfurter, squirting mustard out the far end. "But to my mind, the I.A.D. assholes are nearly as bad. I've got no love for snoops, pal. And even if you're not with I.A.D. any more, you're still a snoop in my book."

"So go back to L.A."

"Can't. Either I stay here for six months or Murphy'll railroad me out of the department with a psycho pension."

"What's wrong with that?"

Riggs put down the half-eaten hot dog. "What would I do then? Sit in my trailer and watch the fucking seagulls until I got up the energy to put a bullet in my head? No, thanks."

"You tried hard enough to get a bullet in the head today."

"That's different." Riggs gulped coffee, dribbling some down his throat. "That comes with the badge. I'm not scared of dying, Capitano. I'd just rather do it on the job than in that goddamned trailer."

Book shook his head in hopeless wonder. "Man, you are crazy."

Blue eyes bored into hazel. "Yeah, I'm crazy," said Martin Riggs. "But I'm *good*."

* * *

It was fortunate that her sons Jason and Billy were on their regular Tuesday-night sleepover at a friend's house, Elaine reflected as she watched her brother prowl the length of her cluttered living room. There were times, like now, when John's inheld power was a little frightening, even to her. Beneath the suits and the civilization was something decidedly feral, something that could rip right through the veneer like a tornado or some other elemental, destructive force. She had seldom seen that force unleashed; the last time had been the night back in 1984 when John had come bleeding to her door to take the Amish woman and her boy back to Lancaster County. What she had read in his eyes had been terrifying.

When he had returned, his eyes had no longer frightened her. They had held instead a sadness so deep that she was saddened for him, although she didn't know what had wounded him so--wounded him far more than McFee's bullet had. Eventually, what she thought of as "The Look" had vanished; but since then, he had been a little remote, a little more unreachable even than before. Not being the kind of man who could air his doubts and emotions to another, he never told her the story. But she suspected: She watched him pass through a string of cookie-cutter women, each of whom left less of an impression than the one before. And she remembered the direct blue gaze of Rachel Lapp and the Amish woman's quiet strength, and couldn't help sighing a little to herself.

Now, as Book's intensity built, he paced faster, slugging Schlitz as though it were water. He'd already downed nearly a six-pack, but the alcohol didn't seem to be affecting him. It certainly didn't impede the words that rattled out of his mouth like bullets.

"His file reads like a movie script!" Book raged. "Guy thinks he's goddamn Rambo! He was on a Special Forces assassination squad in Vietnam. Top marksman rating, heavy into martial arts, knows explosives." He paused for another slug of beer.

"Okay," he continued, "here you have a time bomb ticking away. He's probably screwed up as hell from 'Nam. But for thirteen years he does okay with L.A.P.D., although it seems like every other month he gets a slap on the wrist for drawing his gun unnecessarily. His record's studded with four-day leaves while the department investigated some shooting or other he was involved in." He halted, crushing the empty beer can in one strong hand. "Then what happens? His wife, who seems to have been his only tie to reality, gets killed three years ago in a car wreck. He goes over the edge. The file has four written warnings from the departmental shrink that he's borderline psychotic and probably suicidal. By the time he's worked through *that* little problem, apparently with the help of a new partner, the body count's way into two figures, most of 'em members of some ex-military gang that's been running heroin."

Elaine was stunned. "And he was still on the force?"

Book snorted. "He was a goddamn hero! He and his partner, Roger Murtaugh, wiped out the whole gang by themselves. Oh, sure, their I.A.D. investigated, and they got a reprimand for excessive force and some other minor infractions, but in a few days they were back on the job." Angry, he pitched the crumpled can toward the wastebasket. It rebounded off the rim. Elaine retrieved it and traded it for a fresh Schlitz, which Book popped without even seeming to notice.

Placatingly, Elaine said, "But, John, all that was years ago. You said he was fine until recently, when his partner got hurt. Maybe he just needs more time --"

"And more bodies? No, thanks. Not on my nickel. Riggs pulls his gun just once when I don't think it's necessary and I'll kick his ass all the way back to Hollywood Boulevard."

The phone interrupted her reply. She passed the receiver to Book. "It's McCafferty."

Book groaned. "How'd he know where I was?" But he took it and growled into the mouthpiece. As Elaine watched, his face tightened, eyes narrowing. Book was reaching for his jacket even before he hung up. "Gotta go, Sis. Car bomb in South Philly. And if that's not enough, McCafferty *ordered* me to roust Riggs and haul him along."

Elaine frowned. "John, are you in shape to drive?"

He was halfway out the door. "Unfortunately, I am stone cold sober. That son of a bitch has even taken the fun out of drinking."

* * *

Riggs' hotel room reflected the man himself: slovenly, faded and scruffy, wearing the signs of neglect like a leper's tattered robe. Riggs was slumped on his unmade bed, the Beretta in one hand, a cigarette and half-empty glass of Jack Daniels in the other. Half-hidden among the rumpled sheets was the bottle, and an ashtray overflowing with butts.

As Book surveyed the scene with distaste, Riggs glanced up from the television, where an adenoidal adolescent was touting fast food. From the evidence, Book reflected wryly, Riggs had taken the commercial to heart. Around the bed was strewn the spoor of a Big Mac attack: yellow foam containers, wadded paper napkins, several plastic forks and a large mound of half-eaten and wholly congealed shoestring fries ensanguined with ketchup.

"Well, well," Riggs drawled, "if it ain't El Capitano." He waved the Beretta languidly. "Sit down, boss, if you can find a place."

"Jesus!" Book said. It was almost a prayer. "You really know how to have fun in your off hours." He shook his head. "Some kind of cop. Thought you were supposed to be a regular gold-plated gold shield, a real one-man army."

Riggs' blue stare was bloodshot, but icy. "Used to be. But it seems like even the job can't keep me going nowadays." Then he grinned. "Hell, even shootin' somebody doesn't cheer me up any more." He checked for an answering grin, but Book's face looked like a thunderhead just before the storm. Riggs gave up. "Joke," he said wearily. "It was a joke."

"Some joke."

Riggs sighed and took a slug of the Jack. He studied Book's face for a moment. "Nice treadmark you got there, Capitano."

Reflexively, Book touched his left cheekbone, where a bruise had darkened. It was just the size and shape of the Beretta's black-steel barrel. "Thought you'd appreciate it," he growled. "It's a memento from a maniac."

Riggs snorted. "You got a reason for showing up here, or did you just drop by to give me a few helpful hints from Heloise?"

"There's a job for us, but it looks like you've climbed into the bottle for the night. I'll handle it." Book was relieved. The prospect of starting the investigation alone was a welcome one.

In a single graceful motion, Riggs hauled himself off the bed, set down glass and cigarette and stuck the Beretta into the back of his belt. "No such luck, Cochise. I was just gettin' started. Black Jack can wait 'til later. What's on the program?"

Book sighed to himself and turned toward the door. "Tell you on the way."

Riggs grabbed his leather jacket from the floor and slipped out the door on Book's heels, pausing to lock up. Book scrutinized him. "Riggs," he said, even Sonny Crockett would've shaved a week ago."

"Hey, whatcha want?" Riggs stuffed the key into his jeans pocket and headed for the stairs. "At least I took a bath."

"I noticed," Book said.

* * *

"Nice scenery," Riggs commented as Book's car turned a corner. "I haven't seen anything like this since *The Road Warrior*. What happened here, World War Three?"

The Laser's headlights provided more illumination than the streetlights, most of which had been shot out. In the shadows of dusk, Riggs could just discern the skeletal frameworks on either side, remains of buildings apparently destroyed in some cataclysm of man or nature. A few gutted automotive hulks huddled against the curbs. They were the closest things to signs of life that he'd spotted in a couple of blocks. As for humanity, there was none. Nothing living belonged in this moonscape. He shook his head in wonder. "Fucking urban renewal," he muttered.

Book took his eyes off the road just long enough to check whether his partner was serious. He couldn't tell. Riggs' expression was curious but noncommittal. Book shrugged in resignation. "Not urban renewal. P.P.D. And the Army of Liberty."

"Huh?" Then comprehension dawned. "Holy shit," Riggs yelped, "this is the section your department torched while trying to dig out that gang of apprentice terrorists? Your S.W.A.T. boys took out something like three blocks, didn't they?"

"Accidentally," Book growled, his gaze once again on the street but wandering to the charred ruins. Here and there a rectangle of girders rose from the desolation, testimony to an optimistic builder already intent on resurrecting the area.

Riggs laughed. "God, what a fiasco! Roger and I rolled in the aisle when we heard about that! Made us feel like maybe L.A.P.D. wasn't such a zoo after all."

"Look," Book said, "I'm not defending what happened. There was a lot of sheer stupidity, and some incredibly bad judgement. But the fire was an accident. It just got out of control."

"And people died."

"Four, yeah. All members of the Army."

"How convenient."

"There *was* an investigation," Book said defensively. "Hell, I was in on it. The verdict was that the whole mess was due to one S.W.A.T. team leader, a lieutenant named Mettler, who got carried away and let things get out of hand. The rest of his team just went along with his plan. We pulled Mettler's badge. The rest of the group...quit. Under unofficial pressure."

"Oh." Riggs lit up a Winston and tucked his lighter away. Then his attention was caught by something in the distance. "Looks like we've found the scene," he said.

The car bomb had turned a late-model compact into a ton or so of scrap metal. The hood lay down the street and bits of unidentifiable auto parts were scattered over a wide area. Among the burned-out buildings, the car was right at home.

Book swung the Laser into the curb and stepped out. An ambulance was just pulling away, and two men Book identified as a forensics team were sifting through the debris. He also recognized three Bomb Squad officers scattered among a handful of blue-suits. One of the latter spotted the two detectives and hurried to them. His face was forced into professional rigidity, but his eyes were soft with withheld tears. "Bastards got one of ours," he said.

Book winced. "Got an I.D.?"

The blue-suit nodded. "Maury Kurtzmann. Used to be my lieutenant when I started out in Arson. Good guy."

Riggs was startled to see Book's face go rigid. "Kurtzmann," Book repeated. "You sure?"

"Yeah. They got his wallet out, and his shield." The young cop peered up at Book. "You knew him?"

Book took a deep breath. His hands curled themselves into white-knuckled fists. "Yeah," he said, "I knew him."

* * *

"Hey, Book, you tryin' for the Indy 500 or something?" Riggs leaned into the turn as they screamed around a corner, heading back downtown. "And why the red-light-and-siren shit? The corpse isn't gonna be any deader if we get there five minutes later." The tires squealed again and he grabbed the elbow rest, muttering, "I thought you have to be crazy to drive in *L.A.*!"

Book eased off the gas just a little and slipped the Laser through a yellow light a heartbeat before it went red. Tension was knotted in his shoulders and chest, but he forced himself to breathe deeply and felt the tightness recede a notch. *Don't take it out on Riggs,* he told himself sharply. *He doesn't know. So tell him.* Aloud, he said, "Kurtzmann was with Internal Affairs. He worked with me on the Army of Liberty thing."

"Jesus!" Riggs breathed.

"He and Terry Hollis and I did the investigation."

"And he and his car went up boom right in the middle of the moonscape where it all happened." Riggs ran a hand through his tousled hair. "You, naturally, are thinking there's some connection."

"I'm damned sure there's a connection," Book grated. "But I wanna talk with the medical examiner, a guy named Rogan Harvey, before I start jumping all over my sources. We'll have to wait for toxicology reports and all that, but there might be some preliminary info to get us going." He flipped off the red light as he pulled into the parking lot of the morgue. "And believe me, I want to get going on this one." He cut the ignition and slid out of the car. "Kurtzmann was a good guy. Easy to work with. He had a wife. And four kids under ten." His eyes were slits and his full mouth drawn into a narrow line. "We've got six prime candidates for this one. I'm gonna find out which one it was, and then I'm gonna nail the bastard's balls to the wall."

Inside the building, Book collared a forensics technician. "Where's Kurtzmann's body?"

"The cop who got offed? Tank's got him."

"Tank?" Book was puzzled. "I thought Harvey'd be doing the autopsy."

The tech shrugged. "Harvey's on extended sick leave, as of yesterday. Coronary. There's a designated cutter down from New York--supposed to show us country boys how they do things in the big city." He grinned. "That's Tank."

Riggs lit a cigarette. "A coroner named Tank. What's the world coming to?"

The tech snorted. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, it's short for Tankersley. T. J. Tankersley." He stabbed a thumb toward a door down the hall. "I don't know how long the autopsy'll take, but feel free to sit in."

"Thanks." Book headed toward the autopsy room. Riggs hurried along behind him, lengthening his stride to keep up with Book's longer steps. Even from down the hall, they heard the teeth-grating buzz of a bone saw.

"Tank," Riggs muttered. "Likely, he's the New York version of Arnold Fucking Schwarzenegger. I'm surprised he doesn't just rip the cadavers open with his bare hands. Probably the kind of guy who comes home at night and dropkicks Rottweilers for fun."

As they entered the room, they saw that Tank was indeed going at the job with enthusiasm, but both men were brought up short at the sight of the M.E. The bone saw, Book reflected, probably weighed more than Tank did. The top of the M.E.'s head reached only to Book's shoulder and he figured that, clothing and all, Tank couldn't hit the one-hundred-pound mark on a doctor's scale. Beside him, he heard Riggs whistle softly.

Despite the gravity of the situation, and the fact that Tankersley was at present cutting into the skull of the late Lieutenant Kurtzmann, Book caught himself smiling in sheer admiration. Tank--Doctor T. J. Tankersley, scientist and professional ghoul--was rather a stunning young woman. Her face, topped by tight auburn curls, was oval and lightly freckled and wrapped around eyes of a green that took his breath away. Even her body was substantial enough not to be completely concealed by the standard-issue smock.

The spectacular eyes were cool as they looked across the bone saw at the two detectives, one tall and neatly dressed, the other shorter and ragged. "My, my, what have we here?" said a voice like spring rain. "The Odd Couple?"

She accepted Book's explanation with suitable professional detachment, but Book thought he detected a twinkle lurking beneath the surface. "You're in something of a hurry for results, it seems," she said, but she set down the saw and wiped her rubber-gloved hands on the smock. "Well, gentlemen, I'm not quite finished here, and of course it'll be a while before the tox and histology data are available, but I can tell you that one very interesting little bit of information has come to light."

"Which is?"

She frowned. "Well, in layman's terms, the decedent was severely damaged by the explosion and the resulting fire. His legs were blown off, as well as his left hand." She paused. "But it wasn't the explosion or the fire that killed him."

Book's eyebrows arched. "Then what did?"

She picked up something from a stainless steel bowl on the autopsy table. "This."

Riggs leaned in for a look. "It's a bullet. We'll have to have ballistics check it out."

"I'm 'way ahead of you. It's already been under a microscope. It came from a .44 Charter Arms Bulldog revolver at very close range--no more than four or five feet. The bullet was fired from above your man, apparently as he sat in the car. The trajectory was at a sharp downward angle. With that much power, it could've passed all the way through the body, but it hit the pelvis and stuck."

"Overkill," Riggs suggested. "Somebody wanted to make certain Kurtzmann was dead."

"Or somebody wanted to send a message," Book said grimly. "We've got Kurtzmann, who was in on the Liberty investigation. We've got him shot, then bombed, right in the area where the whole mess came down." He frowned. "And we've got a .44 Charter Arms Bulldog. That's got some kind of significance, if I could remember..."

Tank picked up the bone saw. "Well, I've got to get back to work. You gentlemen are welcome to stay and watch, if you promise not to pass out. They brought in a class of rookies today when I was cutting up a floater--he'd been in the Delaware four days, so the fish had been eating well--and three of 'em hit the deck." She sighed. "They just don't make cops like they used to."

On the way to the car, Riggs whistled. "They just don't make medical examiners like they used to." He laughed. "But I'd sure like to make *that* one!"

Book shot him a look of disgust, only partially successful in disguising the fact that he'd had the same thought. He shook it off. "There are some things I want to check and some thinking I want to do about this Kurtzmann business," he said. "And then there's some stuff I need to let you in on."

"Fine." Riggs lit a cigarette. "While you're checking and thinking, I can get something to eat. You hungry? We could pick up a pizza."

Book couldn't repress a grin. "Pizza after an autopsy, huh? Nice to have a partner with a cast-iron stomach. I had one--Oliver, his name was--who walked into a postmortem, puked, passed out, and cracked his head on the edge of the table as he dropped. The M.E. ended up doing needlepoint on his forehead before getting back to the corpse."

Riggs shrugged. "After some of the stuff I saw in 'Nam, there isn't much in that line that fazes me any more. Whatever's usually inside the human body, I've seen hanging on the outside." He inhaled a lungful of smoke and let it out slowly. "I hope you don't like anchovies," he said thoughtfully. "I hate anchovies on pizza."

* * *

"Nice place you got here," Riggs said around a mouthful of super-special-thick-crust-double-cheese-with-mushrooms-sausage-onions-pepperoni-olives-tomatoes-and-pineapple. He surveyed Book's small apartment with the eye of a man accustomed to reading personality from surroundings. The apartment, on the sixth floor of an older building, was, he thought, much like its inhabitant: functional, livable, but with no frills. Book was apparently a tidier housekeeper than Riggs--*Hell,* Riggs snorted to himself, *Attila the Hun would be neater than you!*--but he had left his marks: suit jacket slung over a chair, shoes kicked into a corner, files stacked on the dinette table.

"Throw me a beer, will you?" Riggs asked. Book, standing at the kitchen counter, launched a can with a little more force than necessary. Riggs fielded it easily, looked at the label and frowned. "What *is* this shit?"

"Schmidt's? Your basic local blue-collar brew. Philadelphia's own."

Riggs popped the tab, took a slug and grimaced. "Figures. Don't you have Coors out here in the back beyond of civilization?"

"Frankly, I'm surprised you even drink beer. Thought you beach boy types only got off on California coolers and designer water."

Riggs threw up his hands, a gesture impeded by the beer in one and the pizza in the other. "Hey, truce, okay? We can sit here and needle each other until the Liberty Bell gets her cherry back, but if we've gotta get along for six months --"

"Truce." Book parked himself backward on a dinette chair, straddling the seat and resting his forearms on the back. "Okay," he said, "what we've got here is looking nastier and nastier the more I think about it. 'Cause what I'm thinking is that that red-haired son of a bitch Randolph C. Mettler is out to get even."

"Mettler--the leader of your S.W.A.T. team?"

"Right." Book frowned. "There were six other guys on the team: Anson Cooney, Harry Howe, Marv LaBatt, Rob Rosenheim, Charlie Henderson, and the youngest, a comparative rookie named Riley Sampson. Mettler, as you know, got the axe. The others were allowed to resign. But Sampson --" For a moment, the words caught in his throat. Riggs leaned forward in expectation. Finally, Book said flatly, "Sampson couldn't take it. He'd made Mettler into his own personal hero. When Mettler went down, Sampson went out his apartment window, twenty floors up. Mettler witnessed the jump."

"Christ on a crutch!" Riggs whistled. "So you think Mettler --"

"Yeah."

"How'd you pick him out of all of 'em?"

"One way." Book knocked back the beer, draining the can. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he said, "Mettler was a gun nut. Had, oh, a couple dozen handguns. But his favorite was a Charter Arms Bulldog .44."

Riggs was about to speak when he was cut off by the jangle of the phone from the bedroom. Book loped out of the room to catch the call. As soon as he picked up the receiver and said, "Book here," a man's voice growled, "Hi, asshole. I have a message for you."

The voice raised the hair on the back of his neck. "Mettler? That you?"

The speaker ignored his question. "I wanted to tell you," the voice said, "that Kurtzmann's death was just to get your attention."

Book fought to keep his voice steady. "Is that so?" he asked as calmly as possible, all the while trying to figure how far he could take the conversation, and listening for background noise that might tell him where Mettler was. But Mettler had chosen a quiet location to place his call; no aural clues were forthcoming.

"I won't be on the phone long enough for the call to be traced, so don't even think about it," Mettler said. "I just wanted you to know that there's more to come."

"More --" Book's voice rose. Riggs silently appeared in the doorway. "Listen --" Book began. But he was talking to dead air. He set the receiver down carefully.

"Bad news?"

"Yeah." Wearily, Book headed back into the living room. Riggs followed. "Very bad," Book said, sinking onto the couch. "Our friendly neighborhood bomber--who, by the way, is exactly who I thought he might be--just let me know that more fun and games are in the offing."

Riggs sat down heavily beside him. He said nothing for a long time. Finally, he looked at Book who was slapping one fisted hand into the palm of the other. "Time to make plans," Riggs said.

Book nodded. "Time for plans," he agreed. "Then you'd better get back to your room and get some sleep. I've got a feeling tomorrow's gonna be one hell of a long day."

* * *

Riggs didn't leave until nearly 5:00 a.m. Book went back into the bedroom and stared at the telephone, frowning. His body ached for sleep--*Been a long time since you could do an all-nighter without paying a price, Book old boy,* he told himself--and his brain was fuzzy around the edges. But his nerves still twitched. He groaned. "Shit!" he said aloud. "If you wake Terry up at this ungodly hour, he'll never let you forget it. Especially if he's got one of his little street-corner sweethearts with him." He stared at the phone a while longer. "And what," he asked, "will you do if he *doesn't* answer?"

The bed looked more inviting by the minute. Finally, Book sighed and reached for the receiver. His call was answered on the seventh ring; the voice at the other end was muzzy with sleep and irritation.

"Hey, Hollis, I'm sorry to wake you up," Book said, "but there's something you oughta know. Did you hear about Kurtzmann? Right. Well, I think one of us is next. Mettler's out for blood; he called me tonight. You know, Mettler wasn't all there at the end. He really went ballistic when they took his badge. And with his kind of experience --" The voice at the other end murmured agreement, fuzzily. Finally Book said, "Okay, Terry, hit the sack again. Sorry I bothered you. Give my best to Brandi or Kimmi or Tiffani or whoever you're balling nowadays." The response was profane, if not particularly imaginative, and Book was chuckling as he hung up.

"Well," he yawned, "at least you did your good deed for the day. Now how about hitting the hay before duty calls again?"

He barely got out of his clothes before falling onto the bed, and was asleep before he could even slide under the covers.

Two hours later, the discordant jangle of the phone bell awakened him long before his mind and body were ready to arise. Clumsily he fumbled the receiver to his ear in time to hear a familiar voice gloat, "Good try, Book, but not good enough. You're next." The click in his ear sounded like an iron gate closing on a cemetery.

* * *

"You okay?" Riggs asked, frowning in concern.

Book shook off the lethargy that threatened to weight him down. It was replaced by a growing anger that darkened his deep-set eyes and stripped his lean face of every emotion except rage. Riggs was taken aback. This was a side of his partner he hadn't yet seen, this barely controlled and finely honed fury. For a moment, despite all his experience with the various forms of physical mayhem and all the bodies he'd left strewn along his lifeline, Riggs thought that he would not wish to cross John Book--at least, not John Book in this kind of mood.

"I'm okay," Book said. In the faded jeans and tee-shirt he'd thrown on after Mettler's call, he looked rangier and tougher than usual. He also looked wearier. He'd left the apartment without stopping to shave, and the near-sleepless night and the bad news had deepened the lines in his face. He glanced at the closed door of the autopsy room. "How much longer's she gonna be?"

Riggs lit two Winstons and offered one to Book, who took it absently. He'd quit smoking shortly after the shootout at the Lapp farm, but right now, he needed the solace of tobacco.

"Book," Riggs urged, "you've gotta get protection. There are few things nastier than a renegade cop, especially a renegade S.W.A.T. cop who, from what you tell me, is one mean bastard."

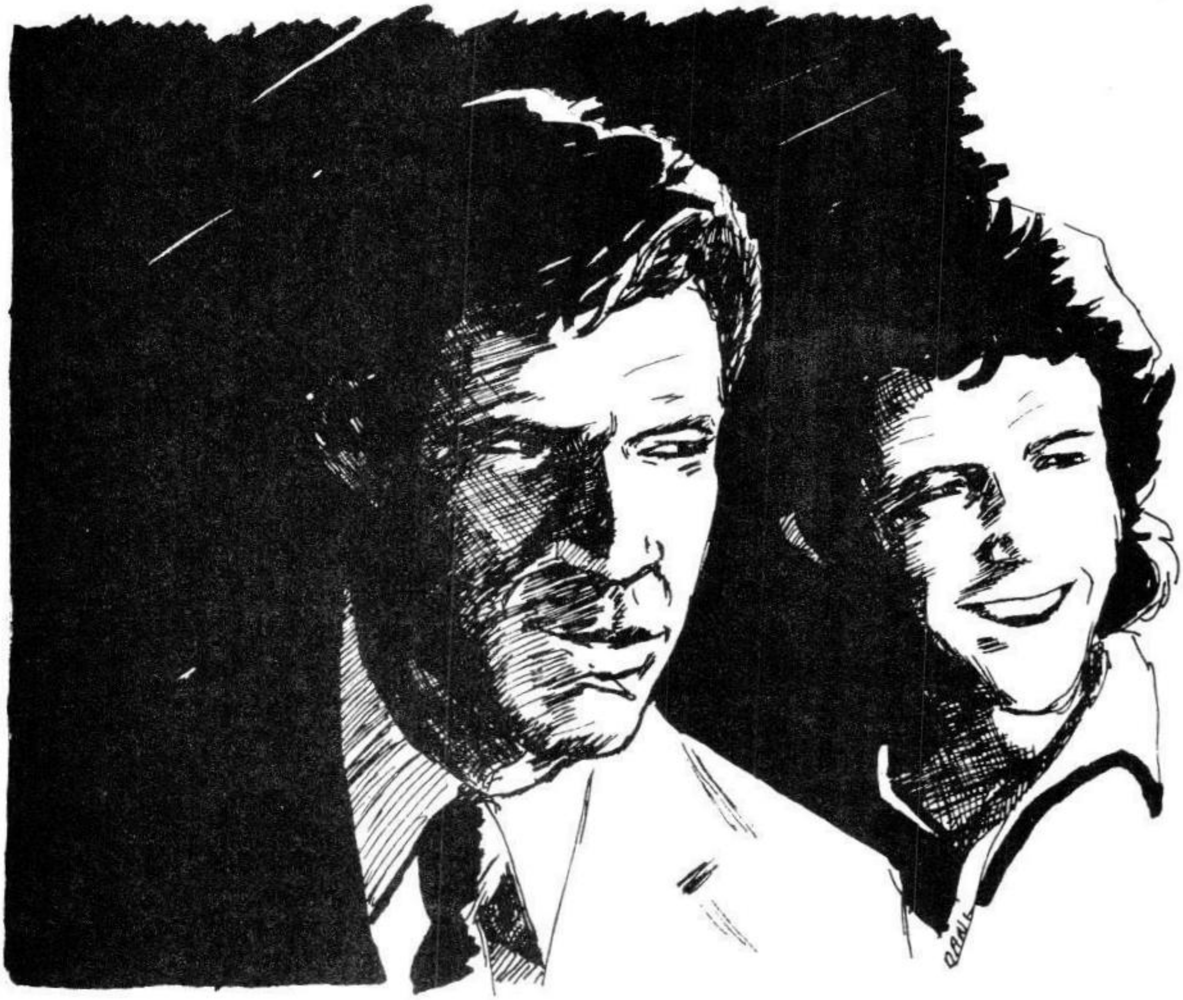
"Yeah." Book felt the smoke sear his lungs and let it out slowly. "One mean bastard. The word around the department was that he came out of Laos in '70 with a necklace of ears he'd cut off N.V.A. soldiers--and maybe some civilians, if the stories were true. They said he always carried the first ear he took--for luck. But once he came back and joined the department, he was a good officer for a long time. Maybe sometimes a little rougher than he had to be, a little too quick to draw his gun --" His pointed look made Riggs wince inside. "But controllable, at least until the Army of Liberty fiasco."

Riggs slid the Beretta out of his belt and checked the magazine. It was full--it always was; he was careful about that--but he felt the need for action growing in him. "So half the P.P.D. is out looking for your bad boy --"

"Who's gone to ground." Book stubbed the cigarette out in the wall-mounted ashtray. "Oh, we could track him down, if we had time. But it doesn't sound as if we have time. Furthermore, nobody's been able to locate any of the other team members, either, which gives me a very bad feeling --"

The door across the hall swung open and Tank Tankersley emerged, shedding her surgical greens. Even as preoccupied and angry as he was, Book felt his heart lift a bit at the sight of her. He sensed a movement at his side and glanced over to see Riggs greeting the medical examiner with a cocky grin. Book shook his head. *Good luck, Riggs,* he thought. *The lady's got better taste.* But aloud he said only, "What's the verdict?"

Tank ran her hand through her short curls. "A lot more straightforward this time. Our old friend the Bulldog again. It left two slugs in Lieutenant Hollis, one in the left abdomen, the other dead center in the heart. Not as close as before; the gun was fired from a distance of maybe thirty feet."



"He got nailed leaving his house this morning," Book fumed. "Goddamn it, he told me he'd be careful!"

She shrugged. "I'll guess Hollis never even saw his killer. Not like Kurtzmann, who apparently was close to him."

"Kurtzmann knew Mettler, of course," Book said. "But he wouldn't have expected Mettler to kill him, although he might've been a little wary..."

"I guess we've got work to do," Riggs said. He grinned at Tank. "Thanks for the help, Doc." Book was heartened to see that Tank didn't return the smile. She just looked tired.

"It's all in the job description," she said. "Take care, you guys." She turned to go and Book stepped quickly after her. In a low voice, he said, "Tank, I know this probably isn't the time or place to make a date, but... could I buy you a drink sometime soon?" He smiled. "I have a thing for a woman who knows her way around a cadaver."

She laughed then. "Considering the trouble you seem to be in, I'd be better off if I said no." She studied him intently for a moment. "Sure, you can buy me a drink, and then I'll buy you one--if you'll make me a promise."

"What promise?"

She spoke lightly, but her green eyes were serious. "That you won't turn up on my table because you were careless or foolish or stupidly macho. I hear you've got a very nasty enemy somewhere out there."

"Don't worry." He nodded in farewell as she turned away. "I'll call about that drink."

"Do." And she was gone.

"What was that all about?" Riggs asked as they headed down the hall.

"Oh, nothing." Absently, Book rested his right hand at belt level, where the .38 bulged beneath his overhanging shirt.

Riggs snorted, but was silent for a while. Finally, he mused, "I wonder what T. J. stands for."

Book shrugged. He'd been wondering the same thing, but he wasn't about to let Riggs know. Surreptitiously he eyed the younger man, who was bouncing along at his side, looking more cheerful than he had since Book had first met him. *Is there any area of my life where this half-cocked California cowboy won't get in the way?* he wondered in irritation. *It's bad enough that I've gotta haul him around during working hours. Now he's making eyes at the likeliest woman I've seen in years.*

"Well," Riggs said finally, "you gonna ask the department for protection?"

"No. I've got some ideas of my own."

"Ideas about making yourself a target, right? To draw Mettler out of hiding? Hey, Cochise, you're gonna end up on Tank's stainless-steel slab, and she is gonna be *pissed*!"

Book's glance was needle sharp. Riggs just shrugged. "I've got good ears. And good enough eyes to know that this particular woman has better sense to get herself mixed up with some I.A.D. asshole. Hell, you've spent so many years peeking through keyholes, you probably can't do anything but watch, anyway."

"Oh, yeah?" Book shouldered the exit door open and they passed into the morning sunlight. "I haven't seen women exactly draping themselves over *you*."

"I do okay," Riggs said easily. "I like women. I like 'em a lot. But the job--the job gets in the way, you know?"

"Yeah," Book said, "I know." And just for a moment, he thought, Riggs' blue eyes were Rachel's. He flinched away from the notion like a nervous patient flinching from the dentist's drill. Instead, he decided to test other waters. "You were married..." he began.

Riggs' shoulders tightened. "Yeah. Eleven years. Until a Valley asshole with a .21 blood alcohol reading crossed the center line."

They reached Book's car. Book unlocked it as he continued, still probing: "And you got a new partner--Murtaugh--and the two of you wiped out some big drug ring and cleaned up a few tricky homicides --"

"And then Roger took a bullet and retired." Riggs' mouth twisted. His eyes were hooded.

Book slid into the driver's seat and Riggs into the shotgun side. "What happened?" Book pressed. He saw Riggs tense and knew he was treading on dangerous ground.

"That's enough," Riggs said curtly. "No more self-exposure bullshit." He dug in his jacket for cigarettes. After lighting up, he leaned back and took a deep drag.

"Those things'll kill you," Book said mildly.

His partner fixed him with a cold eye. "Not soon enough, Capitano; not nearly soon enough."

Book gave up. He swung the car out of the lot and headed downtown. There was silence until Riggs, with one of those sudden mood shifts that both unsettled and annoyed Book, asked cheerfully, "Where're we goin', boss?"

"City Hall. I want to do a little construction-permit research." Book pulled the Laser around a corner. "I just remembered that Mettler's stepfather is a contractor. Mettler's a pretty husky guy, and for a while before joining the force, he worked for the old boy. High steel stuff. I was wondering if old man Prosky has any projects going right now."

"You thinking in terms of hiding places?"

"Yeah. And information."

* * *

"Prosky's busy." Riggs frowned, eyeing the list of addresses he and Book had unearthed. Prosky Construction was named on seven widely scattered projects within the metropolitan area.

Chewing on the pencil eraser, Book ran over the list. "Hmmmmm..." Suddenly, he paused, the pencil dangling unheeded from his lips.

"What?" Riggs leaned across the table. "What'd you find?"

Quickly Book circled one of the addresses recorded in Riggs' untidy scrawl. "Attanasio and Prescott," he said. "A sixty-story office building going into an area that's primarily residential --"

"That address sounded familiar --"

Book nodded. "Attanasio and Prescott just happens to be in the middle of World War Three."

Riggs let out his breath explosively. "Mettler's stepdad is putting up a building right where his son restaged *Apocalypse Now*?"

"Well, he doesn't own the property or anything," Book said. "He's just the prime contractor. But I think Mettler might see something kind of significant in it. He was like that--always looking for omens and such. He used to say being born with red hair was the first sign he was something special. Guy who'd been in his unit said that in 'Nam, he'd listen for owls before going on patrol. Mettler'd told him that the number of times an owl hooted indicated how many N.V.A. he was gonna bag that night."

Riggs shook his head in disbelief. "Sounds like his elevator don't go all the way to the top. Christ, I spent three tours in 'Nam and I never got *that* crazy!" He looked up, grinning. "Well, what do you say, Cochise? Shall we pay a little visit to Prosky's workplace and see if sonny boy is walking the steel?"

Book frowned. "Not right away. I don't want to scare him off, if he's there. I'd rather go in quiet the first time, do a little snooping--" He shot Riggs a look as pointed as McCafferty's head. "See what I can find."

"We don't have enough for a search warrant," Riggs said thoughtfully.

"Just a little reconnaissance," Book said, "to see what we can find. Then, if anything turns up, hit the site with full backup."

"Not exactly procedure," Riggs said, but he was grinning. "So--tonight, after dark?"

"You going along?"

Riggs patted his Beretta. "Why, sure. Wouldn't miss the chance to see Mister By-the-Book Book playing fast and loose with department policy."

"Something I believe you know a little about. How the hell did you and Murtaugh shoot up half of Hollywood without getting your asses kicked out on the street?"

"We didn't *miss*."

Book's gaze was chilly. "Well, no Uzis or AK-47s on this trip, Riggs. In fact, try to keep your finger off the trigger altogether."

"And if we run into trouble?"

"Let me handle it. If you know what you're doing, one bullet's enough."

Riggs snorted, but all he said was, "Hey, it's midafternoon and I haven't eaten since breakfast. You want lunch?"

Book shook his head. "No. I've got a few things to do before tonight. Why don't we call it a day now and meet at my place. Midnight ought to be late enough to make sure nobody's on the site."

"Fine with me," Riggs shrugged. "I've gotta clean house anyway."

"Clean house? What're you gonna do, hire the Philly Fire Department to hose out that pit of yours?"

"Naw." Riggs stood up and stretched. His outflung arms encompassed most of the cramped basement cubicle in which they'd been working. "I just thought I'd call in your S.W.A.T. boys." Book bristled and Riggs shot him a look full of lazy malice. "By the time they get through, the city could put up a nice new office building on the site. Shit, Book, your S.W.A.T. team is the best thing to happen to urban beautification since Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked the lantern in Chicago." He quit stretching and shrugged into his jacket. "You gonna give me a ride back to my place?"

"You might learn to drive," Book said grimly. "I'm getting tired of ferrying you around."

"Oh, I can drive, Capitano. Drove my G.M.C. pickup all the way out here, in fact. Just haven't gotten the hang of Philly streets yet."

Book picked up the list of addresses and tucked it into his hip pocket. "You *drove* to Philadelphia?"

"Hey, I'm a Californian." Riggs turned toward the door. "In case you haven't heard, we drive to the goddamn crapper." Book couldn't help grinning appreciatively. "This time, however," Riggs continued, "I just thought I'd stay groundbound."

Something in his tone made Book glance up. "You a nervous flier?" he hazarded.

The guess was on the mark. "Kind of," Riggs admitted reluctantly.

"Wait a minute. Your file said you've talked down a few jumpers. In fact, you even jumped *with* one."

"That's different." Riggs scratched his stubbled jaw. "Those poor assholes are usually so wired, it takes all my concentration just to keep 'em from going over the edge. And as for the one I took down--hell, the airbag was already inflated; I just controlled the jump so he wouldn't bounce off the edge and go splat in spite of all my noble efforts."

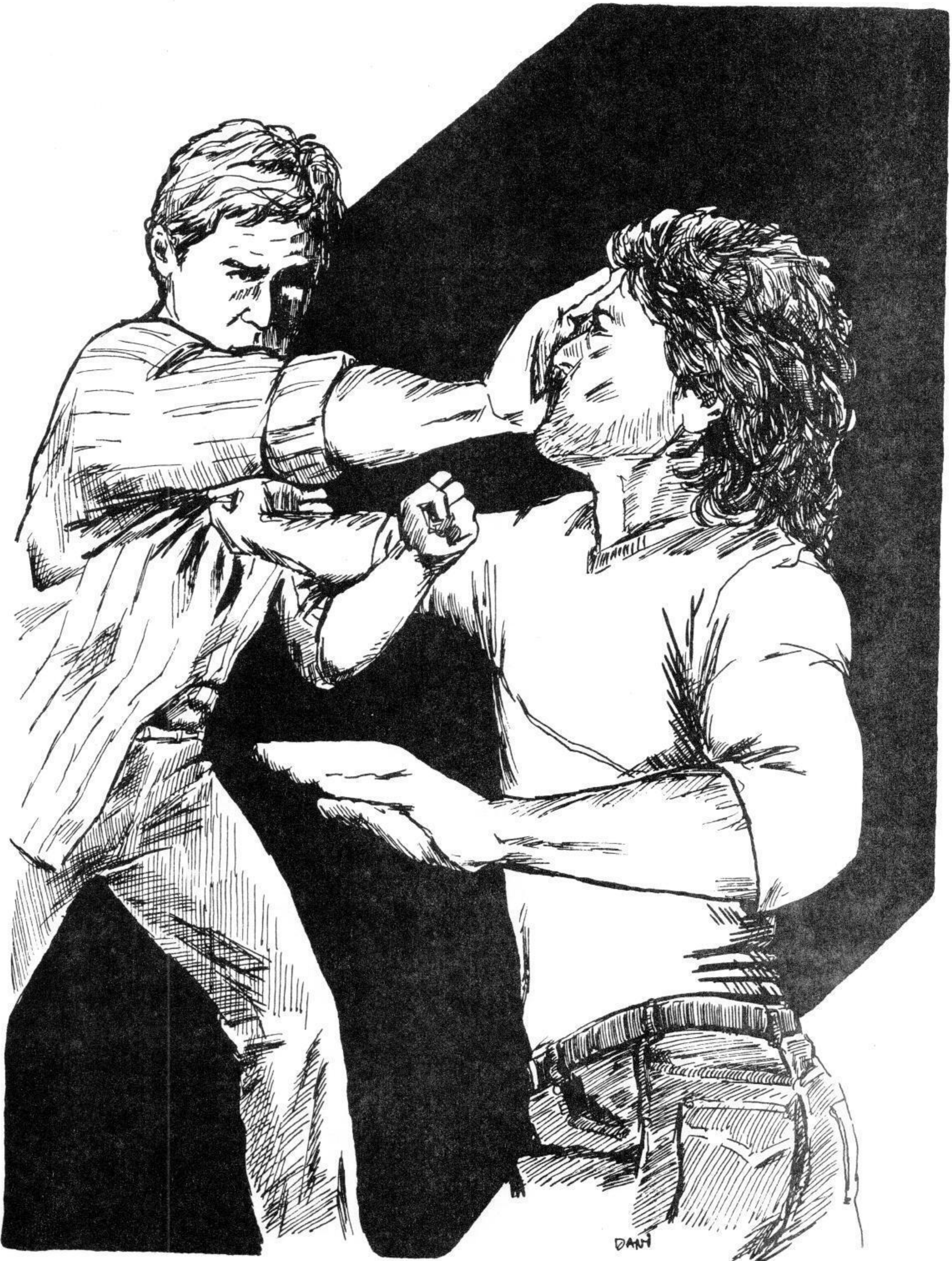
"That was kind of you. And you're planning to go up in a sixty-story steel skeleton tonight?"

Riggs fixed him with a gimlet eye. "Hey, Captain sir, nobody said anything about going *up*. I'll play supersnoop in the foreman's shack or anywhere else, but if you wanna explore the upper elevations, you do it alone."

His words grated on Book, who snapped, "That the way you usually back up your partners?"

Suddenly it was like that first day all over again. Riggs slammed him against the wall, both fists clutching Book's shirt, the blue eyes boring upward into his with a wild fierceness.

This time, however, Book wasn't paralyzed with surprise. All his resentment at Riggs and McCafferty and the whole unpleasant situation rose to the surface and he shoved the smaller man back as hard as he could. Riggs rebounded off the worktable in the middle of the cubicle and went for Book with fists clenched.


DAN

Book curled into the first blow, defusing much of its strength, although the impact on his midsection made him gasp. Immediately, he chopped down on Riggs' shoulder; Riggs retaliated with a sharp upward jab toward Book's throat. His movements were constrained, but packed with power. Book recognized the fighting style known as Jailhouse Rock, a series of short, nasty moves evolved by convicts for combat in close quarters. Book was no slouch at it himself; his tutor had been an old lifer who'd survived thirty-seven years in some of the worst hellholes in the American and Mexican penal systems.

Book deflected the blow with his forearm, then slammed the heel of his hand into Riggs' nose--not hard enough to ram bone splinters into the brain, but hard enough to bring blood. Riggs barely seemed to notice. Instead, he closed in again, and suddenly the two men were grappling desperately, wedged into a corner, neither one with enough leverage or space to do much damage. With great struggle and labored breathing, the battle stumbled to a draw, until Book grasped Riggs' upper arms, glared down into his face, and said in a flat voice, "That's enough."

The words seemed to bring Riggs back from whatever insanity he'd been inhabiting. He stood frozen for a moment as if caught in amber, and Book saw the crazy glare in his eyes fade away. As the adrenaline subsided, Riggs gasped a few times, then with the back of his hand, swiped at the blood streaming from his nose, leaving a swath of scarlet across his mouth. "Hey, Capitano," he grated, "don't worry about backup. You get your ass in the fire, I'll haul it out and piss on it to put out the blaze."

But Book read doubt behind the bravado and realized with a jolt that the words held no conviction. For a moment, he considered asking Riggs what his problem really was. At the end, however, he just sighed. "So much for the truce," he said. "Now, if you're through, let's hit the road. It's gonna be another long night."

* * *

After dropping Riggs at his hotel, Book went into the squadroom. All the way there, he replayed the scuffle at City Hall, trying to fathom what lay behind Riggs' attack and what it portended for their partnership. Whatever it meant, he suspected, was bad news for John Book.

He dug out Riggs' file and studied it for a moment, but knew he needed more information than was contained in the sheaf of forms. He picked up the phone.

Eventually, over the crackle of long-distance lines, he heard the voice, professionally warm and understanding, of the L.A.P.D. psychologist. Book explained what he wanted.

"Captain," she said, "I certainly appreciate your position. But there are matters of confidentiality --"

"I know that," Book interrupted impatiently. "I'm not asking you to reveal any doctor-patient confidences. What I want to know is what happened with his partner, and how Riggs reacted. There's a brief rundown in his file, but if I'm going to understand what I'm dealing with here, I need more to go on."

"All right," she said, "but first I have to go back a few years." Book nodded, even while realizing that she couldn't see him.

"Three years ago," the psychologist said, "Sergeant Riggs' wife died. She had been his main support system, and he went out of control, taking terrible risks and behaving in an erratic and nearly suicidal manner. This continued until he was transferred to Homicide and teamed up with a veteran officer --"

"Roger Murtaugh."

"Right. Sergeant Murtaugh, the department felt, would be a steadying influence in Riggs' life, being older and rather conservative. And, indeed, eventually Sergeant Riggs seemed to settle down. He had far fewer shooting incidents on his record and the risk-taking dropped to acceptable levels. He and Sergeant Murtaugh worked extremely well together. In fact, they became friends."

Book tensed. This was the part he wanted to hear. "Until --?"

He heard her sigh from nearly three thousand miles away. "Recently, Murtaugh and Riggs were sent to Hollywood to investigate the death of a young male prostitute. It turned out that the boy had been killed by a gang of street toughs who had been shaking him down for protection money. When he ran out, they cut him apart. Murtaugh and Riggs tracked down the gang, but one night they found themselves surrounded. Only two of the boys seemed to have firearms, and the officers wounded and disarmed both of them. But while Riggs was subduing one of the uninjured boys, another one pulled a Saturday night special and shot Sergeant Murtaugh."

"I think I'm getting the picture," Book said. "Riggs felt he hadn't protected his partner, that Murtaugh had been hurt because of him."

"That's right. Sergeant Murtaugh recovered, but was retired on disability. And Sergeant Riggs --"

"Went nuts."

Her chuckle was sad. "Hardly a professional analysis, but fairly accurate."

He paused. "So Riggs is...unsure of himself?"

"Oh, very, very unsure. He's become even more reckless than he was before, and far more erratic."

"Do you think I could depend on him in a crisis?"

Now the pause was on her side. "I don't know, Captain Book," she said at last. "I would hope so--but my instinct is to say no. He may freeze, or go completely out of control. There's no way of telling."

A dagger of pain lanced through Book's temple. He rubbed it absently. Finally he said, "Thank you very much, Doctor. I can't say it's been a pleasure talking with you, but it's been...instructive."

"You're welcome, Captain. And good luck. To both of you."

Book thumped the receiver down. Suddenly the prospect of wandering around a darkened construction site with a partner who might self-destruct was less than enticing.

He considered cancelling the operation, but shook off the thought. Mettler was moving fast, and Book needed to move, too. Through his mind ran a fragment of an old poem, something about "*...at the back I always hear/ Time's winged chariot hurrying near.*" He frowned, trying in vain to recall the rest. At any rate, he concluded, time's winged chariot was hurrying like crazy and there was a job to be done.

He checked his watch: 5:15 p.m. At least he had plenty of time to plan his moves over a drink. No more than one drink, though, given his weariness and the evening's work still ahead. Briefly he thought of grabbing a nap, but knew it would be unwise. By the time he'd wrapped up a few crucial things on his desk and gotten home, he'd be able to catch three or four hours at most, and he knew from experience that he'd awaken logy and slow. Better to tough it out until the reconnaissance was done.

Rubbing his aching head, he pondered how he could pass the evening. Then a smile crept across his face. *Hell, why not?* He reached for the phone again.

* * *

Book had always found the name of the Corner Bar just too preciously self-conscious for words, but it *was* on a corner and it *was* a bar and it happened to serve the widest range of suds on tap that he'd ever found in Philadelphia. Besides, what with the proliferation of greenery and cozy curved booths, it provided a measure of privacy. Book usually despised fern bars, but he had to admit that Tank seemed to appreciate the place.

She was smiling as she sipped her J&B. "Frankly," she said, "I hadn't expected you to call so quickly."

"Me neither." Book grinned crookedly. "But I wanted to talk with you--away from the butcher shop."

"Watch it, John; that butcher shop is the place I love."

"I know, I know!" He couldn't help chuckling. "And I won't ask --"

"How a nice girl like me ended up in a morgue?" She grimaced. "If I had a dollar for every idiot who asked me that, I could retire the national debt and have enough left over to buy Imelda Marcos' shoe collection. Let it just be said that I always wanted to know how things worked: ailing alarm clocks, irons, vacuum cleaners, automobiles, the human body. I finally figured out that the human body was the most fascinating machine of all, and once I got that far, I wanted to know what could make it break down. And --" she delivered a flourish, "here I am." She eyed Book over the rim of her glass. "So what's your story, Captain?"

He shrugged. It wasn't something he discussed with many people; even he and Elaine hadn't talked about it for years. Finally, he said, "Long, sad tale, but it boils down to this: My dad was a cabinetmaker. He was shot down in a robbery when I was five. For a long time I saw him as some kind of hero.

Then I started to realize that he was no hero; he was just a good guy--and a victim. And I figured that a cop was a good guy who could kick ass. So I became a cop."

Tank didn't deliver any sympathetic homilies. She merely said, "In short, you were looking for justice in the world, and thought you'd be the one to deliver it."

"Yeah, I guess so." He sipped at his beer, making it last. "But enough of my boring history. I've got a question for you: What does T. J. stand for?"

The look she shot him was pure American Revolution: Don't Tread on Me. But her voice was friendly. "We don't know each other well enough for that."

"Right."

She softened. "Look, it involves an old boyfriend, and it's another long, sad story. Maybe later." She eyed him appreciatively, noting the marks and tracks of experience on his now-haggard face. "I don't suppose you've ever loved and lost."

Book tried to keep his answer light. "Not exactly lost."

"Just mislaid?"

Mis-laid...close enough, he thought, recalling his and Rachel's one night of passion in the grass. Aloud, he said, "Something like that." He finished the beer. "But right now, I've got other things to worry about."

"Like the fact that you've got a bullseye on your forehead and a partner who could teach Insanity 101 in Bellevue?"

He glanced up in surprise. "How'd you find out about Riggs?"

"Word gets around when you deal with as many cops as I do. Your California cohort has made himself known in the department. Besides," she added wickedly, "he called me for a date shortly before you did."

Book shook off the stab of irritation. "Did you take him up on the offer?"

"I'm thinking about it."

An evil notion insinuated itself into his mind. He grinned to himself. "Well, before you go out with him, there's something you ought to know."

"What?"

"His Wassermann V.D. test came back positive."

"How interesting," she crooned, running her forefinger around the rim of her glass. "He told me that you've been seeing a therapist about your little premature-ejaculation problem."

Book's booming laughter turned heads throughout the bar. Tank laughed along with him, her husky chuckle a pleasant counterpoint. By the time they subsided, Book noticed that the headache that had tormented him since that afternoon had vanished. He actually felt good. Tired, but good.

"I don't believe it," he grinned. "That nutso son of a bitch did me a favor without even meaning to. He just gave me the best laugh I've had in days." He chortled to himself. "Boy, wouldn't it piss Riggs off to know that! Bastard hates my guts."

"I don't think so."

"What?"

She smiled. "From the way he talked about you, I'd say he admires you quite a lot, in some ways. Yes, he made a few derogatory comments about Internal Affairs, but on the whole, I think he'd like you to trust him. Only, I get the feeling that he doesn't really trust himself. He strikes me as the kind of man who can't let his feelings show. In fact, I believe, in that way, he's rather like you."

"Like me? Naw." But Book suspected, uncomfortably, that she was close to the mark, at least about John Book. This pathologist seemed as able at dissecting feelings as she was at dissecting bodies. To deflect her, he checked his watch. "Tank, I've gotta go--got to work tonight. But I'd like to see you again soon."

"Tomorrow? Same time, same place?"

He grinned. "You called it. Anything gets in the way, I'll let you know." Impulsively, he reached out and caught her hand. "Hey, Tank, thanks. You're the most congenial M.E. I've ever shared a drink with."

"That's not terribly flattering," she said, her full mouth twisting wryly. "I've *met* your regular M.E., Harvey. Quincy, he ain't." She slipped her hand from his and gathered up her shoulder bag. "But you're a good man, John Book, although I think you may not acknowledge it. And your crazy partner is a good man, too, I suspect."

Book shook his head as he rose and threw a handful of tip change on the table. "Maybe, maybe not. All I can do is hope that his craziness doesn't burn *my* ass."

* * *

Book spent a long time in a cold shower, hoping that the shock would revive his flagging body. By the time he emerged, teeth chattering, he knew that it hadn't helped much.

Naked, he padded into the bedroom and slipped on a pair of sweatpants--black, for the dark work ahead. He was lighting a cigarette when the doorbell rang. Riggs, he mused, was prompt.

Barefoot and bare-chested, he strode through the living room to the door. He was leaning toward the peephole when the door surged inward, cracking him hard on the forehead. Stunned, he reeled back, cursing himself and his hazy mind for forgetting to set the police lock in its slot. Then the doorway was filled with a large red-haired man and he saw the drill in Mettler's hand and realized that the ex-S.W.A.T. leader had simply drilled out the deadbolt while Book had been deafened by the shower.

Behind Mettler, five more men, all of them unpleasantly familiar, crowded into the apartment, reaching for him. Book swung at the nearest but, groggy from the blow to the head, he lacked force and his target dodged. Then they were all upon him, wrestling him to the floor as he vaguely heard the coffee table overturn. He grunted as somebody's shoe made contact with his ribs; then he faded out a bit as another blow struck his temple. By the time he swam back into full consciousness, his wrists were secured behind his back, a wide strip of adhesive sealed his mouth, and his captors were hustling him down the hall, bypassing the elevator in favor of the less-used stairwell.

Book struggled, and tried to yell despite the gag, but realized that his muffled grunts would never be heard through the sturdy walls of the old building. Besides, he recalled ruefully, of the other inhabitants on the floor, two were out of town, one worked the night shift and the last, an elderly retired interior decorator, always removed her hearing aid before going to bed at nine. Mettler, he realized, had done his homework before setting up this little ambush; he'd known that he and the rest of the team had little to fear from an interruption.

Book was propelled through the stairwell door and nearly tumbled down the first flight of stairs, but two of the men--Cooney and Howe, he saw from the corner of his eye--caught him by the arms before he could fall. He heard the hydraulic door hiss shut behind them.

* * *

Martin Riggs was starting to get the action high he used to feel before a job that could turn nasty. At least, he thought of it as a high, although on an intellectual level he knew he was just riding the tide of his own surging adrenaline. By the time he and Book were on the construction site, he'd be so wired that a car backfiring would set him off. It was an addictive feeling, and it was a feeling he'd had only rarely in recent months. A touch of it in the courtyard, when he'd laid out the three drug dealers and shot it out with the fourth, but that was all. The high just hadn't been there, really, since Roger had gone down in Hollywood.

Fiercely Riggs shook his shaggy head, clearing the memory away. He had other things to think about.

As the elevator climbed from the underground garage to Book's floor, Riggs double-checked the Beretta's load and slapped the spare magazine in his hip pocket. Briefly, he wondered how many rounds Book planned to take, and whether they'd need the firepower. The recon sounded simple enough, but he was starting to get a notion about Book.

He looks like a real straight-arrow, he mused, *but there's something about him...* Ruefully, he touched his nose, still tender from Book's blow. *He's one tough bastard,* he chuckled to himself. *Not a bad infighter, either. But the way he talked about Mettler's omens, and the way he snapped to that construction-site idea... There's something kind of intuitive in the way he works. Sure, he knows the city and I don't, but it's more than that. It's instinct.*

He watched the floor counter creep toward Six. *Hell, Riggs, you're the same way back home. Half the time you don't know what's wrong, but you feel it, like some big bad mother breathin' down your neck. Book's got the same way of operating. He grabs something and shakes it until the meaning falls out. Not* *bad--for an I.A.D. asshole.* He chuckled again as the door slid open and he stepped out.

He marginally registered the closing of the stairwell door at the far end of the hall, but his eyes were caught by the door of Book's apartment standing ajar. Sure, Book could've left it open, knowing Riggs was on the way--but Book, he knew, was a cautious man. And Book was a target.

Gun out, Riggs slipped to the side of the gaping doorway, waiting for a bullet from within. Only silence greeted him, and every nerve ending told him that nothing breathed inside the apartment. Still, he paused, listening, before whipping around the doorjamb in a crouch, the Beretta extended. Nothing.

Nothing but a cigarette burning on the brown tile just inside the threshold.

Book's apartment wasn't large and it took Riggs only seconds to establish that his partner wasn't there. That's when Riggs remembered the stairwell door.

"Shit!" he yelped, whirling back through the doorway and pelting down the hall. His mind was racing so fast that that the thoughts weren't really thoughts, just impressions, a kaleidoscope of must-do's and can't-do's and what-if's. He knew he had to let the department know what had happened, knew that he might be wrong and Book not in the stairwell. But he also trusted his instincts and the evidence of the still-burning cigarette. Whatever had happened to Book had happened just before he'd arrived, and that meant Book was probably still alive and being taken somewhere. And if the group was on the stairs, he'd have to follow. He had no time to call for help, no time to arouse the neighbors. Otherwise, he ran the risk of losing his quarry--and in this unfamiliar city, that was one thing he dared not do.

Gun at the ready, he slid into the stairwell as silently as he could. He heard heavy, hurried footsteps a couple of landings below him, and occasionally a scuffling sound that told him Book, if it were indeed Book, was putting up a fight.

"Keep it up, Cochise," he urged under his breath. He slipped down the first flight, hugging the wall, not daring to peer over the tubular steel railing into the stairwell. He could track them by sound in this echoing manmade cavern as long as they didn't exit on one of the floors and take the elevator the rest of the way. He doubted they'd be so bold; with a captive, they'd be far too visible. He was gambling that they'd go all the way to the garage. If they'd stashed a vehicle there, he could follow them in the pickup.

Counting landings as he went, he knew he was on the second floor when he heard below him a muffled groan and a curse. Somebody growled, "Son of a bitch!" and he grinned savagely, figuring that Book had somehow gotten a shot in.

By the time Riggs hit the cement floor at the base of the stairs, the door to the garage had opened and shut. He listened, but heard nothing. Then a car engine turned over in the garage and, swearing, he cracked the door cautiously. A nondescript blue Ford van was just pulling away, and in the passenger-side mirror, he caught a glimpse of fiery red hair.

Riggs' battered pickup was parked near the door and he made it into the driver's seat just as the van turned onto the exit ramp and vanished. Kicking a couple of empty beer cans out from underfoot, he hit the ignition and sent the pickup screeching after the van, trying to gauge how long it would take Mettler to reach street level. Book's street, he recalled, wasn't a busy one, and he'd have to lay back a ways.

His calculations, he saw as he emerged onto the darkened road, were right on. The van was just winking into a turn at the nearest corner, moving into a four-lane street where traffic was still flowing, even at this late hour. Hunched over the wheel, every sinew thrumming, Riggs gave chase.

Sometimes, when the traffic eased up, Riggs hung back and ran without headlights for the lower profile the darkness gave him. When more cars would filter onto the street, he would hit the lights again and move up in the pack. Always he kept an eye on the van far ahead, and only rarely did he remember to curse himself for not having recorded the P.P.D. radio frequency. He hadn't the time or attention to spare for cruising the channels on the radio mounted under the dash; everything he had was focused on not losing the van.

Within ten minutes, Riggs knew he was totally lost. Outside his window, the neighborhoods changed, evolving from Book's well-tended middle-class venue to an area where broken glass, trash-strewn streets and an occasional derelict car signaled a rougher region. As he drove, he noticed traffic fading away until at last the pickup and the van were the only things moving on the street. Once again, Riggs cut the lights.

Finally, as he turned a corner a block behind the van, he recognized the moonscape and knew that Book's instincts had been right: Mettler had indeed come home to roost, however temporarily, at the scene of his humiliation. Ahead, Riggs could barely discern, in the weakly diffused lights from downtown, the skeleton of the skyscraper Mettler's stepfather was thrusting toward the heavens.

He cut the engine and let the pickup drift toward the curb, watching as the van turned into the construction area and stopped at the gate of a chain link fence eight feet high. The gate was secured with a padlock. Security lights around the site spotlighted Mettler as he climbed out of the van and unlocked the gate.

As the van drove in, Riggs slipped from the truck, Beretta in hand, and hugged the shadows until he reached the fence. By then the van had passed through and Mettler had snapped the padlock shut. Riggs watched the van pull up to the steel framework. The rear doors swung open. Into the yellow light stepped five men carrying weapons and a sixth whose arms were bound behind him and whose mouth was sealed with tape. Mettler joined them. Book moved stiffly, as though he'd had rough usage, and Riggs noted a dark streak down the side of his face: blood streaming from a cut on his temple.

Okay, Riggs, what now? he asked himself. *There are six of 'em and you could probably pick off three before they started shooting back--but one of 'em just might decide to take out Book before tackling you. And there's no way you can get over this fence without their seeing you --*

Any question of honing his sniper's skills became moot when the entire group vanished behind the van. A moment later, Riggs heard an electric whine; then a rectangular cage, open-sided but for a wire screen, began to rise along the side of the building. He caught sight of five men inside it before it moved beyond the lights and was swallowed by darkness. Then the two remaining members of Mettler's team strolled back into view and took up guard positions near the van. Both, Riggs noted with interest, were carrying Ingram submachine guns. He considered the odds.

* * *

The elevator cage was cramped and Book was crushed against the door with Mettler just in front of him, pinning his shoulders to the frame. The ex-S.W.A.T. leader was grinning in a way that Book had come, at some cost, to know signaled both hostility and a kind of manic glee.

In the weak glow of one tiny work light in the cage, Mettler's large, perfect teeth gleamed. "Oh, Book," he chortled, "you always wanted to rise in the world, didn't you? Got yourself a gold shield, then got yourself a captaincy, then got yourself a cushy slot in I.A.D. where you could have fun putting other cops outta business." He tightened his grip on Book's upper arms. "But remember, Book, what goes up has to come down--and you're gonna come down with a splat. Sixty floors down. You ever see a jumper who fell sixty floors? Poor old Sampson only dropped twenty, and he wasn't too terrific to look at. After sixty, won't be much left of you 'cept a splotch of bloody meat. They're gonna have to I.D. you by what's left of your fillings."

Book growled behind the tape. Mettler just laughed. "Save your strength. By the time the department is scraping you off the sidewalk, the boys and I will be long gone. We've got contacts, you know; good contacts. In a couple of days, we'll have new names, new places to go. And you'll be a cold slab of steak on the coroner's table."

Mettler's strong fingers dug painfully into Book's arms. Book breathed deeply and kept himself from flinching. He couldn't talk and he couldn't move, but his mind was racing, wondering how much time he had before the cage reached the top floor and Mettler sent him over the edge. The elevator was so crowded that he didn't even have room to get leverage for a kick to Mettler's shin. That wouldn't do much good anyway, he thought bitterly, except to earn swift and no doubt painful retaliation.

Surreptitiously, he tested his bonds. It hadn't taken him long to realize that his wrists were bound with strapping tape, probably the most effective restraint since handcuffs, as it was unbreakable and unstretchable. He'd need a knife to free himself.

He winced as his right forearm jammed against something sharp. *A knife--or a piece of metal,* his mind exulted suddenly. His numbed fingers explored, and found a small projection jutting out from the doorframe. He began rubbing the tape across it as the cage continued its inexorable climb. The movement, slight as it was, brought a stab of pain from his right side, where a kick had cracked ribs. He ignored it. He didn't have much hope of success, but right now the tiny sliver of metal seemed like the only chance he had.

Mettler was talking again: "-- Ears, Book. Yeah, that's it. Before I send you bye-bye, I'll slice off your ears and add 'em to the string I brought back from 'Nam. And your eyes. That's good: Send the departmental spy to glory without his eyes and ears. Something fitting about that, don't you think? I learned how to gouge out eyes from good old Uncle Sammy, you know. Easy as poppin' a grape off a bunch. Just a little thumb pressure..."

Gruesome as the prospect was, Book welcomed Mettler's absorption in his impending mutilation. At least it distracted the ex-cop from the cautious movements of Book's bound hands. Book couldn't tell if he were making any progress; his hands were so numb from impaired circulation that he suspected he was cutting more flesh than tape. But he worked on.

Too soon the cage creaked to a stop. Mettler reached over Book's shoulder to unlatch the door, then propelled Book through with a powerful shove. Book stumbled and landed on his right knee on bare concrete. Around him the surface stretched away and away, but at the perimeter of his vision he could see steel girders, darker shadows against the darkness, framing the open floor. Beyond, the lights of Philadelphia looked very far away, and altogether too far down.

Cooney pulled Book to his feet as the others left the elevator. Mettler reached back inside the cage and slapped the Down button. As the elevator began its descent, he chuckled, "Might as well wait 'till LaBatt and Howe get up here; hate for them to miss the fun." Then he turned to Book, and his pale eyes were diamonds in the dark. "Or maybe we won't wait after all. Don't know how long I can resist seein' you fly, boy."

Rosenheim planted a large hand in the middle of Book's chest and shoved. Book stumbled backward, but kept his footing. "Hey, Randy," Rosenheim grated, "can I hurt him a bit first?"

Mettler shrugged good-naturedly. "Why, sure, Rosie. Go ahead. We've got a few minutes before the others get here; may as well enjoy ourselves."

Book saw the fist coming and jackknifed while twisting away from the blow. Rosenheim's driving hand punched past him with a whuff of displaced air. Rosenheim didn't even have time to curse before the outer edge of Book's bare foot caught him hard on the kneecap. He hit the floor and Book kicked him again, this time in the groin. Rosenheim collapsed, gasping with a shock too great to let him scream.

There's one! Book raged in dark joy. He knew full well how slim his chances were. The tape still bound his wrists and he had no idea how much he had managed to fray it. Furthermore, his tied hands threw his balance off. But, by God, if he was going down, he'd go down fighting. As heavy shoes scuffed on the concrete, he spun to meet the new challenge: Henderson, a wiry, pockmarked little scrapper.

He saw Henderson glance down and knew the man expected another kick. So Book lowered his head and rammed, aiming for the solar plexus and hitting it dead center. Behind him he heard Mettler's angry shout.

Henderson was tougher than he looked. He staggered with lost breath, but recovered too quickly and counterattacked. Book tried to dodge and Henderson feinted.

It didn't take Book long to realize that Henderson was working him toward the edge of the flooring. A glance told him he was in trouble. He had been maneuvered onto a projection from the main floor, a twelve-foot-wide span that thrust out from the structure for a distance of twenty feet. The girders supporting the span jutted even farther.

Christ, if I could only use my hands! He twisted his wrists desperately, but the tape still held. His breath was coming more heavily now, his nostrils flaring, the gag preventing him from dragging air into his straining lungs. It had been a long time since he'd trained in hand-to-hand combat, and although he was in good shape, these conditions were less than favorable.

He heard a voice, Cooney's, snap, "Hey, Randy, why don't we just shoot the fucker?" before Henderson was on him again, coming in low and fast with fists jabbing. One caught him on his injured side and he flinched, but managed to twist away before Henderson could get a grip on him. The ex-cop recovered and closed in and Book, watching his approach, waited until the last moment before throwing himself to the floor and scissoring his legs across Henderson's. Caught by surprise and already off-balance, Henderson fell, hit the concrete and without pause, rolled over the edge. After a moment, Book heard a wailing cry that wavered, faded, and stopped abruptly.

All right! he thought savagely, rolling clumsily to his knees. But now Rosenheim, limping, was back in action, and both he and Mettler had drawn their guns. Mettler's Bulldog was sighted on Book's abdomen and Rosenheim's Browning on his head.

Mettler's face was contorted, his mouth working in soundless rage. Finally he found his voice. "Goddamn you, Book!" he screamed. "First Sampson, now Henderson! You're gonna pay, you son of a bitch!" Book saw his index finger whiten on the trigger. Involuntarily, Book stepped back, bracing himself for a bullet. Mettler, seeing the move, grinned horribly. "That's right, Book; keep moving and maybe I won't put a slug in your belly. Maybe I'll let you drop without a bullet in you."

The concrete was cold beneath his feet and a night breeze licked at Book's bare torso, chilling him, but not half so much as the hard black muzzle of the gun. Behind the gag, his mouth was cotton-dry. But some stubbornness, some grim pride stopped him in his tracks. *Shoot me if you're going to shoot me, you sadistic bastard,* he raved in words Mettler could not hear, *but this is as far as I go.*

As if from a distance, he heard Cooney say, "Looks like Howe and LaBatt are gonna get here in time for the fun after all," and realized that the elevator cage was climbing into view. But his attention was focused on Mettler. Book didn't realize how tense he himself had grown until, with a snap that startled him, the frayed tape around his wrists parted and his hands flew free.

Suddenly, the world exploded.

For a moment he thought that Mettler had fired, but then he saw that the S.W.A.T. team leader wasn't even looking at him. Mettler was turning in a defensive crouch even as Rosenheim catapulted backward, his Browning flying from a dead hand. This weird ballet was accompanied by a fusillade from the elevator. Then Cooney and Mettler were firing back. Cooney was slammed against a vertical girder, blood spurting from his chest. Over the gunfire, Book heard a familiar voice yell, "Hey, Cochise, let's *bury* these fuckers!"

Joy and relief surged through him as he realized that his partner had somehow found him and was efficiently evening the odds. Ripping the tape from his mouth, Book grinned tightly as he launched himself at Mettler, grabbing for the Bulldog. His reaching hand knocked the gun aside just as Mettler squeezed the trigger; the bullet, intended for Riggs, went wide. Book slammed into Mettler and the two men went down together, rolling and scrambling for control of the gun.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Riggs approaching, ejecting an empty magazine from the Beretta, the spare mag in his left hand. That's when Mettler jackknifed and rammed a knee into Book's ribs, breaking his hold on the Bulldog.

Book expected the bullet now, but Mettler knew where the more immediate threat lay. Rolling away from Book, he brought the Bulldog to bear on Riggs before the detective could reload, and pulled the trigger. The gun clicked empty.

Riggs grinned maniacally. "Looks like we're even," he told Mettler, his eyes gleaming. "At least for now." He swung the spare magazine up toward the Beretta's grip and started to slam it home.

But Mettler was fast. He came up off the floor with great speed, hurling the empty Bulldog with all his strength. In reflex Riggs threw up his hands to deflect the missile; the gun knocked the Beretta from his hand and sent it flying into the shadows.

Riggs snapped into a defensive hand-to-hand stance, fists up, protecting his torso with his forearms. He danced lightly as Mettler came in low and fast with short, punishing jabs. Riggs parried several blows with ease, skipping away and making Mettler follow him.

Mettler knew a few tricks as well. He feinted, weaved and dodged, drawing Riggs out, testing him. Riggs countered with a weird combination of blows that Book identified as moves from several different martial-arts disciplines: t'ai chi, Brazilian jiujitsu, karate, even the lesser-known African capoeria. Their battle moved back and forth across the floor, a violent and strangely beautiful dance of death.

Book came painfully to his feet, distracted by the stabbing in his side, but not too distracted to see that Mettler was pulling the same maneuver that Henderson had pulled earlier on him. "Watch out, Riggs," he called hoarsely. "You're running out of room."

Riggs spared only a glance toward the edge, but as he did, his foot came down on the Beretta and he stumbled. Mettler charged in low, cutting Riggs at the knees. As Riggs fell, Mettler pivoted around to twist his body into the air and drive both feet into the detective's midsection. Riggs, already off-balance, flew backward, over the edge and into the darkness.

"No!" Book screamed as his partner disappeared. Wildly, he threw himself at Mettler, but tripped over Rosenheim's sprawled body. He saw Mettler grab the Beretta and ram the magazine all the way home. In that moment, Book's hand found Rosenheim's gun and he swung it up as Mettler took aim. "Not this time, asshole," Book grated, and put one perfect shot between Mettler's astonished eyes. Body and gun clattered to the floor, and suddenly there was silence.

Book straightened carefully, looking for more danger; but the four ex-S.W.A.T. men were dead, one of them on the pavement sixty stories below.

Briefly, he wondered about Howe and LaBatt, until he realized that Riggs would've taken care of them. The thought of his partner sent sorrow stabbing through him, sorrow and regret and anger at the futility of it all, that Riggs had come all the way across the country to die.

Drawn to the scene of the execution, he walked slowly out onto the jutting apron of concrete. The breeze picked up, making his sweat-slick body shiver. "Christ, Riggs," he said half to himself, "did you have to go like *that*?"

"Book?" For a moment he thought the voice was coming from his own mind, but then it returned, weak and shaky: "Book?"

"Riggs?" Shocked with hope, he raced to the edge and looked down. About fifteen feet beneath him, a girder thrust out from the building; and clinging to the far end of the beam, clinging with the strength of desperation, was Martin Riggs. Both arms were wrapped around the steel less than a foot from the end and his legs dangled into the stygian gulf below. He looked up, and even in the darkness his face was white. "Book," he implored in a voice gone thin, "help me."

Peering down made Book's head spin and he felt himself leaning out over the abyss. Quickly he pulled back. "Hey," he called down, "can you get your legs up and wrap 'em around the beam?"

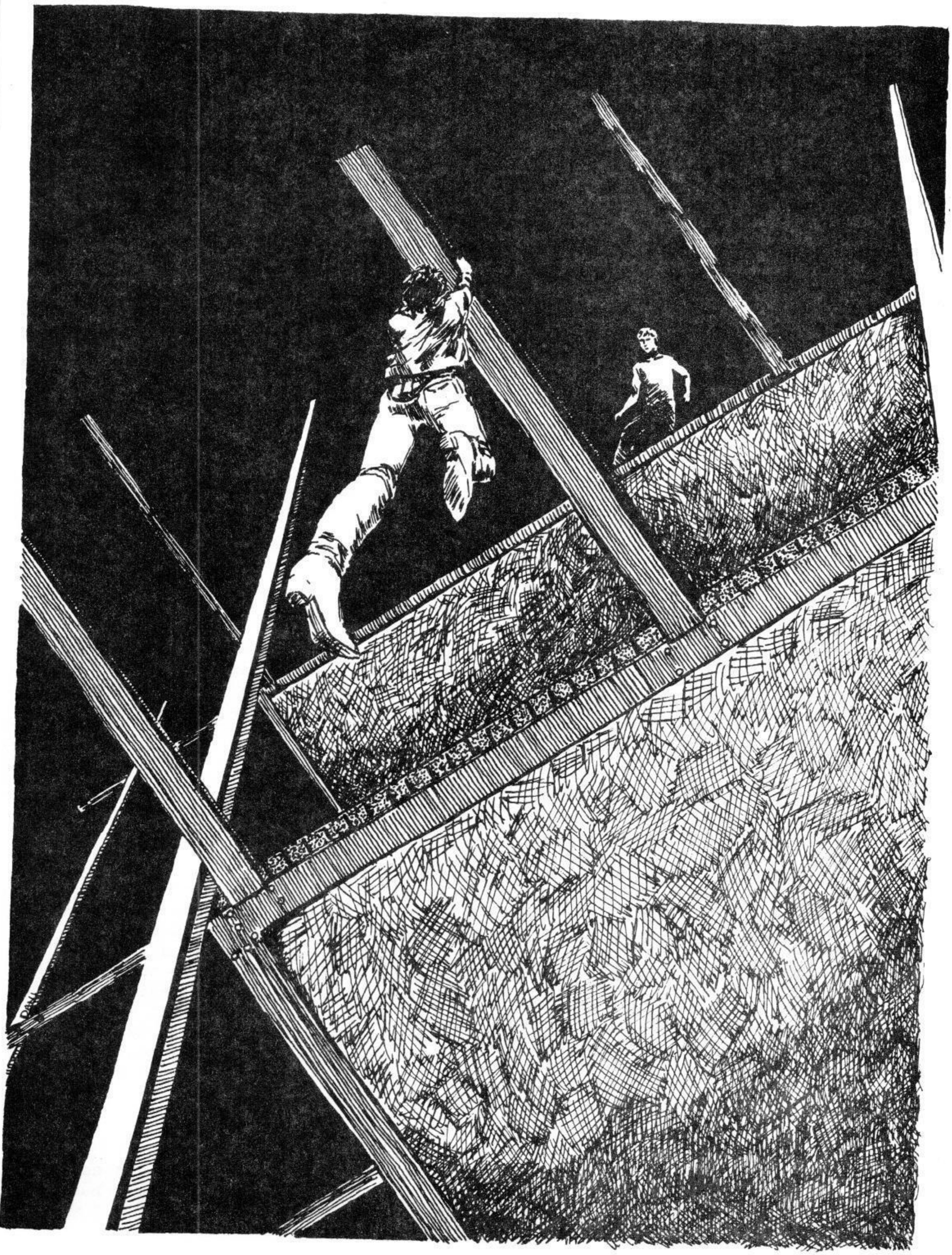
Riggs didn't reply, only stared numbly. Book knew that look; he'd seen it once long ago when, as a rookie patrolman, he'd gone up to rescue a kid who'd climbed to the top of a water tower and frozen there. He recalled what Riggs had said about being leery of heights.

"Just hang on," he called. "I'll get you, I promise." But as he raced for the elevator, he didn't know how he was going to manage. Riggs was clearly clinging with the last rags of his strength; there was no time for Book to get back to the ground and summon help. He was on his own.

He rode down to the next level and ran across the floor. Riggs still hung there, nearly twenty feet out from the edge. But in the few minutes it had taken Book to descend, Riggs had slipped. Now only his hands gripped the rough edges of the girder.

Book cast about for a rope, a chain, anything he could use to secure himself and Riggs, but the area was clean. Gritting his teeth, therefore, he stepped to the edge of the floor and lowered himself until he was straddling the beam. He took a deep breath that made his cracked ribs protest, then began cautiously to edge out along the beam as the breeze plucked at his hair. He felt vertigo playing around the corners of his consciousness, but shoved it aside, focusing on moving an inch at a time out over the void that was the sleeping city. He was at the same time acutely aware of the breathtaking distance between him and the ground, and of Riggs, frozen so far out of reach.

He saw Riggs' right hand slip, then catch again, and prayed, *Hold on!* He moved faster, his long legs dangling. Now he was ten feet away, now eight, now five--and suddenly he was there, reaching down for Riggs' hand just as his partner's strength gave way. As in slow motion, he saw Riggs let go and threw his body lengthwise along the girder, grabbing. His hand caught Riggs' wrist and his partner's weight slammed him into the steel, jarring his injured side and wrenching his shoulder so hard that he thought for a moment it had been dislocated. But Riggs hung suspended from this tenuous lifeline.



For a moment, it was all Book could do just to hold on. "It's okay, Martin," he said as calmly as possible. "I'll get you outta here."

Gathering all his remaining strength, he yanked the smaller man upward while throwing his free arm around the beam to grab Riggs' belt. He barely caught it, but catch it he did. A moment later Riggs was lying crosswise over the girder, panting and trembling, and Book was prone across him, doing the same.

Finally, Book propped himself up. "Okay," he said, "time to go home. But I can't carry you; you're gonna have to come back under your own steam."

Cautiously Riggs swung a leg over the beam and sat up, facing Book. "I'll make it," he said grimly, although his voice was shaky. Book just nodded, reversed himself on the girder and started hitching his way back, Riggs right behind him. The return trip seemed to stretch time to its limit, but finally they were off the girder and onto the concrete.

They lay on the floor for a long while, half-disbelieving in their survival. Eventually, Riggs curled into a sitting position and ran his fingers through his tangled hair. Something caught his eye and, surprised, he peered at his hand, then at the other one. "No wonder I was slipping," he said in wonder. He turned his palms toward Book. They were dark with blood. "The edge of that beam must've been pretty rough. I didn't feel a thing--too scared, I guess." Then his grin split the shadows. "Hey, Cochise, looks like I was wrong about you--you *can* do something besides watch!" He paused, and the smile faded. "Seriously, though," he added, "you saved my life out there. Thanks doesn't seem like much to say after that, but--well, thanks."

Book shrugged, and immediately regretted it as his wrenched shoulder protested. "Well," he said, "you saved my life earlier, so I figure we're even." He eyed Riggs carefully. "Until you showed up, I thought I was going to take my solo flight without even going through ground school. You're a damned good backup."

There was a long pause. Then Riggs whispered, "I know."

Book tested his body a piece at a time, but decided that he had escaped permanent damage. Wincing, he was rolling onto his side when Riggs said tentatively, "You know, something happened to me out there."

Book cocked his head inquisitively, but said nothing. Instinct told him not to push, but to wait in silence. Finally, Riggs continued, "When I was hanging there, I was scared shitless. I don't think I've ever been so flat-out terrified, even in 'Nam when a Cong scout bounced a frag grenade off a tree and right into my lap. But you know --" He looked into Book's face, eye to eye. "You know, there was something kind of--seductive about walkin' on nothing but air. I knew all I had to do was let go, and everything'd be fine. All the problems, all the struggles--gone. A hell of a lot easier than eating my gun. About the time you were coming down to get me, I started thinking seriously about letting gravity take care of it all. I came this close --" He pinched a half-inch of air between thumb and forefinger.

"Why didn't you let go?"

Riggs spread his hands. "In the end, I just couldn't. But it wasn't easy, Cochise; I had to hang there and make up my mind *not* to die." He laughed, but the laughter held a grim edge. "What a pisser! After all the times I've tried to off myself, to decide I'd rather live..." He shook his head in wonder.

"Hell, you can't die now," Book said dryly. "You've got nearly six more months to make my life miserable." Tentatively, he hoisted himself to his feet. So many body parts hurt that no single pain stood out, so all of it was bearable. "Well," he said, "I guess we've got a shitload of reports to write on this one."

"Yeah." Riggs stood shakily. Then he looked up in surprise. "Hey, I just remembered something. When I was out there, you called me Martin. Only time you've used my first name." He grinned coyly. "Does this mean we're engaged?"

Book snorted good-naturedly. "Hell, we aren't even *friends*."

Riggs headed for the elevator, but stopped and looked back at the tall Philadelphia detective who was limping behind him. His voice was sincere when he said, "Maybe not yet. But --" The words trailed off. Finally, as he stepped into the elevator, he said, "Hey, let's go back upstairs for a minute; I need to get my gun. Then let's find an all-night diner. I'm so hungry I could eat McCafferty's old gym socks."

* * *

"I told you one bullet was enough," Book said over his beer. "That's all it took to nail Mettler, in the end."

Riggs slugged a mouthful of bourbon, holding the glass clumsily between his bandaged hands. Clean-shaven and in laundered clothes, he looked several years younger than Book had ever seen him. "Maybe so," he said, "but it took more than that to get those other assholes off your case." He grinned. "At least I got to have a little fun down on the ground with LaBatt and Howe. I knew I couldn't shoot 'em without alerting the others, and I'd been wondering how to get over that fence without their seeing me. But when they turned to watch the elevator come back down, they gave me just enough time. LaBatt didn't even know his neck was broken 'til he hit the ground. Howe put up a little fight, but once I got that Ingram away from him, he wasn't Mettler's match when it came to hand-to-hand."

Book shifted cautiously in the booth. His ribs, securely taped though they were, rewarded him with a stab, as did his shoulder. "Well," he said, "I've got to admit, between us we put 'em all away." He matched Riggs' grin. "Who knows? This partnership might work out after all."

Riggs shot him a steely stare. "On the other hand, maybe not." He glanced meaningfully to his left.

Sandwiched between the two men in the booth, Tank sipped her drink with false demureness. But she couldn't maintain it, and erupted into a husky hoot of laughter. "Listen, you two," she snorted, "I am an Eighties woman. I am what you might call an uppity broad. I do not put up with men wading into combat over me. That whole routine is, if you'll pardon the expression, a load of Brahma shit. Has it occurred to either of you that I might want to make my own choice, rather than strolling into the sunset with whichever of you two Neanderthals whops the other into the ground?"

Surprised into silence, Book and Riggs just stared at her. Then, simultaneously, they found their voices. In chorus, they demanded, "What does T. J. stand for?"

Tank's jaw dropped. Then she laughed again. "Jeez, guys, I'd rather not say, really."

"If you tell us," Book said earnestly, but with a sly twinkle around the edges, "we promise not to whop each other into the ground."

She sighed. "Well, you asked for it. My dad was a Shakespeare prof at Syracuse. He insisted on naming me Titania Juliet, which a former lover abbreviated to Tits whenever he got a notion. When things started getting bad between us, he called me that all the time, which is why he's a former lover. And that," she said firmly, "is the last I want to hear on *that* subject." She drained her J&B and glanced around the bar. "Now," she said, "which of you two battered but redoubtable knights of the pavement is going to accompany me to dinner?"

"Allow me." Book slid stiffly from the booth and offered his arm.

In a moment Riggs was beside him, ramming an elbow into his partner's undamaged side. "No," Riggs grinned, "allow *me*!"

Tank gazed at them for a moment, then scooted out of the booth. Insinuating herself between them, she linked arms with both and pivoted, swinging the whole group toward the door. As they strolled away, she gave each one a delighted grin. "You know," she growled in a clench-jawed Bogart voice, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

WILLIE SCOTT'S RESTAURANT REVIEW

I'll never eat dinner here again!
Service is awful. The host is ten.

I could have more fun on a sinking ship.
(I'll kill Indy if he leaves a tip.)

Snake and eel and what's that horrible goop?
Waiter! Waiter, there's an eye in my soup ...

I guess I'm not hungry. Sorry 'bout that.
Shorty ... Shorty, let me have your hat!

-- Jacqueline Taero

NOTICES

CURRENT ZINES

A TREMOR IN THE FORCE #3 - All STAR WARS zine. Features "Full Circle" by Carolyn Golledge. Boba Fett has managed to survive the Sarlacc. Now he's after Han Solo's hide in revenge. "Murder on the Interstellar Empress" by Marcia Brin. Han and Leia are on the first vacation they've taken in years, but an apparently drug-related murder draws them into its investigation. "The White Feather" by T. S. Weddell. Young Han Solo had it all, until he defied Starfleet authority and was made an example of by the men in charge. All Darkside Section with material by Michelle Malkin, Robin White, Jeanine Hennig and Gail Small. Much more by your favorite writers both old and new. Art by Wanda Lybarger, Martynn, Dianne Smith, Dani, Steven Fox, Jenni, Nancy Stasulis, Barbara Frances-Simon, Pat Easley, Mark and Melea Fisher, Jim Markle, and others. 250 pages, some reduced. $17.50 FC. Make checks payable to *Cheree Cargill, 457 Meadowhill Drive, Garland, TX 75043.* TIF #1 and #2 are sold out.

BetterIdeaZine - Are you looking for a zine devoted exclusively to Harrison Ford? Well, look no further. BetterIdeaZine is the answer to your quest. Not simply a newszine, not just a fiction zine, but a combination of the best of both. BetterIdeaZine comes to you four times a year, averaging 80 pages, chock full of news and doings of your favorite actor, as well as reader comments, poetry, fiction, artwork, and lots of other goodies. BIZ is a Harrison Ford zine by Ford fans, for Ford fans. Don't be left out--subscribe now! $5.00/issue, special fourth class mail; $6.00/issue, first class mail (US, possessions and Canada); $7.00/issue, overseas airmail. Send check or money order payable to: *Cynthia L. Smith, Editor, BetterIdeaZine, 31 Lincoln Avenue, Lansdale, PA 19446.*

CATALYST! Collected 1 - A riveting alternate STAR WARS universe of Truth within Falsehood, Love within Hate, Light within Dark, and friendship that transgresses yet is divided by war. Containing the first stories in the series (many of which are out of print), all extensively rewritten and reilloed, along with totally new material. A special limited-print edition. $13.50 plus $2.40 FC, or $.94 book rate. *Galactic Winds Press & Graphics, c/o Jeanine Hennig, P. O. Box 166362, Irving, TX 75016.*

CHOICE PARTS - A new Harrison Ford zine, just a bit more on the adult side. "Chance Encounter" by Kate Birkel. Tommy Lillard was minding his own business when the strangest looking thing he'd ever seen fell out of the sky--with a beautiful, sharp-tongued princess as its passenger. "Remembrance" by Carolyn Golledge. Han and Leia had returned to Corell to search out a family totem, lost when Imperial troops had destroyed the Solo homesteading twenty years before. "The One That Got Away" by Cypher. Han had found a lead to one of the most fabulous treasures in the galaxy. Now, all he had to do was dive into the depths of an ocean-covered planet and convince the local piscine inhabitants to turn over their treasure to him. Much more by Ann Wortham, Jeannie Webster, Martie Benedict-O'Brien, Pat Nussman, Patricia D'Orazio, and others. Art by Wanda Lybarger, Martynn, Dani, Dianne Smith, Jim Markle, and Barbara Frances-Simon. $15.00 FC. *Cheree Cargill, 457 Meadowhill, Garland, TX 75043.*

THE COMPLEAT ZEEK, Vol. I - This first of a two-volume set contains stories in the SW, ST, and IJ universes, including "Honor Binds Me," "Spock's Elf," "Perchance to Dream," "Queen's Gambit," "Skyfall," and more. About 200 pages. $12.50 FC; $11.50 bk ins. *Pat Nussman, 2 J Breezy Tree Court, Timonium, Maryland 21093.*

DECEPTIVE JOURNEY - Live with Han Solo through one of his earlier adventures before STAR WARS. $10.35 (includes postage within Continental USA). Money orders to avoid delay. *Lynda Vandiver, 603 Jones Avenue, Madisonville, KY 42431.*

FAR REALMS 7 - Over 300 pages of exciting STAR WARS fiction featuring work by Cheree Cargill, T. S. Weddell, Linda Knights, Chris Jeffords, Samia Martz, and Jeanine Hennig; with art being done by Wanda Lybarger, Jenni, Suzy Sansom, Martynn, Dani, Mark and Melea Fisher. Please be advised that this issue contains some material that could be considered adult. No same-sex will be depicted, and we feel that the scenes involved are in good taste, but please use your own discretion in ordering. $16.50 plus $3.00 FC. *Galactic Winds Press & Graphics, c/o Jeanine Hennig, P. O. Box 166362, Irving, TX 75016.*

FAR REALMS 8 - STAR WARS fiction by Patricia D'Orazio, Chris Jeffords; Karen Ripley, Jeanine Hennig, Carolyn Golledge, Danaline Bryant, Matthew Whitney, Marcia Brin, and Michelle Malkin. Artists include Mark and Melea Fisher, Wanda Lybarger, Dani, Jenni, Mark Murphy, and Jim Markle. Close to 400 pages offset, reduced. $17.50 plus $3.50 FC, or $1.19 book rate. *Galactic Winds Press & Graphics, c/o Jeanine Hennig, P. O. Box 166362, Irving, TX 75016.*

FIELD STUDIES II - Features "A Day in the Life" by L. R. Virgil. Let's put it this way...the attempted rape by five co-eds, the subsequent faculty hearing and his summary dismissal from Marshall College was the high point of Indy's day! "Pact With the Devil" by T. S. Weddell. Indy's Jewish colleague has managed to escape from Nazi Germany, but his wife and children are being held there. The price of their freedom? Indy must retrieve a priceless sacred object for Hitler. "The Crystal Skull" by Cheree Cargill. Indy had only dreamed of ever seeing this incredible artifact, but other parties were determined to have it as well. And everyone overlooked the fact that the skull had a mind of its own. More adventures by Patricia D'Orazio, Ann Wortham, and Jeannie Webster. Poetry by Martie Benedict, and Beth Lentz. Art by Wanda Lybarger, Martynn, Suzy Sansom, Cheree Cargill, and Laura Virgil. $14.00 FC. *Cheree Cargill, 457 Meadowhill Drive, Garland, TX 75043.* FS I is sold out.

HARRISON FORD FUN BOOK - A puzzle fanzine. Giant collection of over 100 word search and other puzzles based on Harrison Ford's character portrayals in HEROES, HANOVER STREET, FRISCO KID, BLADE RUNNER, RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, STAR WARS, THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, RETURN OF THE JEDI, INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM. Also test your knowledge on trivia and script quotes quizzes. All puzzle solutions included. $10.00 includes postage within Continental USA. Money orders to avoid delay. *Lynda Vandiver, 603 Jones Avenue, Madisonville, KY 42431.*

INDIANA JONES IN THE DARK CONTINENT by Lynda Vandiver. Everything you always wanted to know about a field trip with archaeologist Dr. Indiana Jones, but were afraid to ask. This 17,000 plus word novel takes the archaeologist and some of his students to the adventure of their lives when they travel to an ancient burial site in Afria. Romance, comedy, danger, fun, excitement, exotic settings,... there's something for everyone. $10.00 includes postage within Continental USA. Money orders to avoid delay. Prompt service. *Lynda Vandiver, 603 Jones Avenue, Madisonville, KY 42431.*

PERCEPTIONS - The "other" Harrison Ford fanzine. Contributors include Barbara Anderson, Carolyn Golledge, Cheree Cargill, Sally Syrjala, and others. $12.80 (includes postage). Money orders to avoid delay. *Lynda Vandiver, 603 Jones Avenue, Madisonville, KY 42431.*

SOLO - A fanzine with all sorts of stories about Han Solo. From his youth to his exciting and adventurous life before that meeting in the Mos Eisley spaceport, through the struggles of the Rebellion and his life with Luke and Leia afterwards. All stories and shorts written by Lynda Vandiver, and Lynda Vandiver and Joyce Devine. Cover by Barbara Frances-Simon. $11.00 (includes postage). *Lynda Vandiver, 603 Jones Avenue, Madisonville, KY 42431.*

SOUTHERN ENCLAVE - The most talked-about letterzine in SW fandom. Each issue features articles about SW and the people who brought it to you, reviews of fanzines, newsclippings from around the country, ads and zine listings, and pages and pages of stimulating letters of comment on SW and SW fandom. Zine listings are free. Published quarterly. Each issue is approximately 60-65 pages reduced. $4.00 per issue, $16.00/year. Back issues available for $2.00 each. Makes checks payable to *Cheree Cargill, 457 Meadowhill, Garland, TX 75043.*

WOOKIEE COMMODE 4 - *(The STAR WARS FAN Q award-winning fanzine!)* Yes, back by popular complaint--the zine with something to offend absolutely everyone! Once again, this issue features the cream of the crop! Fiction by Carolyn Golledge, Samia Martz, Jill Thomas, Carol Moffat, Karen Ripley, and many others. Limited copies left of this issue and a few left of issues 1 and 2, but issue 3 is sold out. 292 pages, spiral bound; $17.00 FC mail; $15.50 book rate. Order from: *Dr. Mary Urhausen, Double D Press, 42 Three Mile Road, Racine, Wisconsin 53402.*

FUTURE ZINES

FLIP OF A COIN - Seeking submissions for #12 and future issues - fiction, poetry, art, cartoons, etc., relating to all characters portrayed by Harrison Ford throughout his career. *FLIP OF A COIN, Paula Truelove and Jenny McAdams, Editors, 502 McKeithan, #4A, Tallahassee, Florida 32304.*

LONG BOW - A fan publication based on HTV/Goldcrest's "Robin of Sherwood." Currently seeking contributions of short stories, vignettes, poetry, songs, art, and historical perspectives. All art should be originals, in ink, or print-ready copies, on 8½" x 11" paper. All written material to be submitted should be double-spaced, typed on 8½" x 11" paper. Length of stories should be limited to 10 or 15 typed pages. Continuing story lines are discouraged. Please send a self-addressed, stamped manilla envelope for the return of all submitted manuscripts or art material. Publication date and price have not yet been determined. Contributions and inquiries should be sent to: *Sue Rutherford, Co-Editor, Celtic Hart Press, 2611 Rockbrook Drive, Plano, TX 75074.*

ONCE UPON A BLUE MOON - A 'no-frills' MOONLIGHTING letterzine is urgently soliciting letters of comment! I know there are fans out there! For final publishing date and price, please SASE: *NICKI LYNCH, 4207 Davis Lane, Chattanooga, TN 37416.*

MISCELLANEOUS

ATTENTION: FANS OF HARRISON FORD! Still photos available from RAIDERS, BLADE RUNNER, STAR WARS, EMPIRE, JEDI, TEMPLE OF DOOM, WITNESS, MOSQUITO COAST, and more. Also have loads of candids. List #1 requires three (3) 1st class stamps; List #2 includes many, many candids taken on location while WITNESS was being filmed; also requires three (3) 1st class stamps. Lists #2A and #3 require two (2) 1st class stamps for each. *Paula Truelove, 502 McKeithan, #4A, Tallahassee, FL 32304.*

SALE!! Long-time STAR WARS fan liquidating collection! Lists available of toys, photos, zines (including WARPED SPACE back numbers); magazine and poster lists forthcoming. Send legal-size SASE for each list you want to: *Lisa Adolf, 317 Lincoln Street, Snohomish, WA 98290.*

Seeking copies of FLIP OF A COIN 1, 2, and 3. If willing to sell, please contact *Irina Ozernoy, 2630 39th Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94116.*

Seeking copies of FLIP OF A COIN 1 and 3, and SKYWALKER 6. If willing to sell, write *Ann Berzansky, 2800 Logan Road, Ocean, NJ 07712.*

ZINE SALE - SW and multi-media zines, many out of print. Also SW and HF related miscellaneous items. SASE for list. I'm running out of room and my closets simply won't hold it any longer. *Thekla Kurth, 851 North Pheasantbrook Circle, Centerville, UT 84014.*

ZINE SALE - Mostly STAR WARS and INDIANA JONES with just a few media ones. All are original copies in excellent-to-mint condition with front and back covers intact. Some are out-of-print, some are rare and hard to find. Issues available include: LEGENDS OF LIGHT, TREMOR IN THE FORCE, WOOKIEE COMMODE, THE WHILLS, FORTUNE & GLORY, SOUTHERN LIGHTS, HOTH OR BUST, A QUESTION OF HONOR, A SEASON OF DARKNESS, JEDI DAWNING, PERSPECTIVE, THE REBEL AND THE ROGUE, FIELD STUDIES, A NEW HOPE, CONTRABAND, FROM A CERTAIN POINT OF VIEW, OUTLAND CHRONICLES, ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE DAGOBAH, AGAIN, EVERYTHING BUT THE KITCHEN SINK, CROSSED SABERS, ABODE OF STRIFE, DILITHIUM CRYSTALS, OF OTHERS AND SUCH, SOUTHERN KNIGHTS, DOCKING BAY, A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, FAR REALMS, GUARDIAN, FLIP OF A COIN, SHADOWSTAR, SHADOW-DANCE, FACETS, and OUR FAVORITE THINGS. Send SASE for issues available and prices. *Lynda Vandiver, 603 Jones Avenue, Madisonville, KY 42431.*

FOR SALE: Back issues of sci-fi magazines including ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS, SF MOVIELAND, DAREDEVILS, SFTV, etc. Also some zines, stills, etc. For list, send SASE to *Shani Moore, 203 East 11th Street, Sylacauga, AL 35150.*

STILL PLAYING CATCH UP? An out-of-print fanzine reproduction service. All zines are officially out-of-print and offered here by editorial permission. This service is a non-profit operation with prices based on expenses only. Includes ARCHEOLOGY 101, KESSEL RUN, MILLENNIUM, CROSS SABERS, A TREMOR IN THE FORCE, FAR REALMS, FACETS, MOS EISLEY CHRONICLES, DOCKING BAY, and EMPIRE REVIEW. Send SASE for prices and specific issues available. *Lynda Vandiver, 603 Jones Avenue, Madisonville, KY 42431.*

BOOK MARKS - We have a supply of the Book Marks available for those who would like extras. To cover the cost of postage and handling, please send $1.00 for every two Book Marks ordered. *FLIP OF A COIN, 502 McKeithan, #4A, Tallahassee, FL 32304.*

FreeFlight and VHF proudly present: *GOLD*, a music tape by Zack and Martie (Benedict) O'Brien featuring songs inspired by MOSQUITO COAST. Contains all the moods and imagery of a unique film, captured in evocative lyrics and set to a haunting, rhythmic score. $10.00 cash, check or money order. Send to *GOLD, O'Brien, 901 Garner Street, #2, Colorado Springs, CO 80905.* The complete lyrics to GOLD are printed in FLIP 11. Don't miss GOLD. This is VHF as you've never heard it before...

FLIP OF A COIN

4/5

That's right, folks! This time FLIP's a double issue - 300 pages of fiction, poetry, artwork, and cartoons pertaining to characters brought to life by Harrison Ford. Read selections on Han Solo, Indiana Jones, Martin Stett, Paul Winjam, Lt. Col. Barnsby, David Halloran, Kenny Boyd, Tommy Lillard, and Rick Deckard. Features include:

TREASURE HUNT *by Martie Benedict, illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Han and Chewie encounter more adventures when Ben Adrick, King of Yaniwess, hires the *Falcon* and her crew to help him find and return a legendary ancestral sword, the Flame of Lotha.

RING AROUND THE COBRA *by Linda Ruth Pfonner, illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Hitler still wants the Ark... Follow Marion and Sallah as they try to rescue Indiana from the clutches of the Germans who have kidnapped and returned him to the Well of Souls.

MY LITTLE STOWAWAY *written and illustrated by Barbara Frances-Simon.* A four-year-old can be a handful. Han gets a quick lesson in child care upon discovering the *Falcon* has an unexpected passenger.

DRIFTERS *by Dani.* Tommy Lillard had met many unusual people in his travels, but this barefoot stranger really had him puzzled.

THE DOPPELGANGER, PART I, *by Christine Jeffords, illustrated by Betsy Peed.* Han Solo is kidnapped and held prisoner by the Empire for several days where he is finally convinced to turn against the Rebel Alliance...or does he?

MY ENEMY, MY FRIEND *by Janet Wells, illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Han Solo *thought* he had killed Greedo in the Mos Eisley cantina...

CHOICES MADE *by Lynda Vandiver, illustrated by Barbara Frances-Simon.* Deckard is faced with the most important choice of his life.

HARRISON FORD FANS!

→

THE LITTLE PEOPLE *by Kathryn Agel, illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Yes, Leia, there really are Thevshi. Another in the Starbright Children's Universe.

NOT A SCRATCH *by Ruth Radecki, illustrated by Yvonne Zan.* Lando is forced to explain to Han why the *Falcon* is not quite in the same shape she was.

ENCOUNTER *by Sheila Paulson, illustrated by Barb Johnson.* The death of a former student leads Indiana Jones into a surreal adventure.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER *by Jacqueline Taero, illustrated by Dani.* Do you ever wonder why Leia was so...nice...after Han was released from carbon freeze?

CLAIRE DE LUNE *by T. S. Weddell, illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* While in Paris, Indiana meets Sarka, who makes him an unusual proposition.

A MATTER OF COMMITMENT *written and illustrated by Dani.* But no! It's another Ord Mantell story! Find out why Han can't commit himself to the Alliance's cause. Find out what strange thoughts are keeping Leia awake at night. Find out why See-Threepio smells so bad and what Boba Fett can't do to pretty young Port Authority clerks. All this and much more in a story of changing feelings and high adventure.

Poetry and filks by Jacqueline Taero, Martie Benedict, Elaine Christiani, Sara Fensterer, Barbara Frances-Simon, Elizabeth Warren, T. S. Weddell, Dani, Tonya Cox, and Karin Zygowicz.

Additional art and cartoons by Martynn, Martie Benedict, Dani, Sharon Palmer, Suzy Sansom, Yvonne Zan, and Carlotta Vaughn.

Cost of this issue is $14.00, plus $3.00 first class postage. Please make check or money order payable to FLIP OF A COIN and mail to:

FLIP OF A COIN
Paula Truelove and Jenny McAdams, Editors
502 McKeithan Street, #4A
Tallahassee, Florida 32304.

Very few left!

NEW YORK
CALIFORNIA !!
JM

FLIP OF A COIN 6

It's that time again and we're proud to announce that the sixth issue of FLIP OF A COIN is now ready for publication. This issue contains selections on a large variety of Harrison Ford's characters: Indiana Jones, Han Solo, Tommy Lillard, Bob Falfa, Rick Deckard, Kenny Boyd, Martin Stett, and Lt. Col. Barnsby. Features include:

LEAVE IT TO SOLO...OR BEAVER JOINS THE ALLIANCE *by T. S. Weddell, illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* The Cleaver household has a close encounter of the Corellian kind.

INTROSPECTIVE IN A BLACK CHEVROLET *by L. R. Pfonner, illustrated by Suzy Sansom.* Falfa's musings before, during, and after the Paradise Road race.

CORELLIAN FANTASY *by Marcia Brin, illustrated by Dani.* A rather mundane day at the office turns into one fanwriter's version of RETURN OF THE JEDI. (Eat your heart out, George!)

JOHNNY, WE HARDLY KNEW YE *by Patricia J. D. Kyle, illustrated by Sharon Palmer.* While visiting the Wall in Washington, Kenny meets the sister of a vet, who makes him realize that the war caused pain for civilians as well as the men who fought.

RENEWER'S WIND *by Martie Benedict, illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* It is the time of his first festival and the young Voolan, Solonai, ponders what advice his Corellian father might give him.

KARMA *by L. A. Adolf, illustrated by Yvonne Yan.* Marcus Ravenwood Jones is forced to face his feelings and confront his father, Indiana Jones. This is the follow-up to "Kismet" which appeared in FLIP #2 and is a chilling, but beautiful tale.

I DON'T BELIEVE I SAW THAT *by Sherry Magee, illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Sherry takes us on a "tour" through all the wonderful scenes that were shown in the notorious blooper reel from RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK and INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM that was presented at WorldCon.

ONCE A SCOUNDREL, ALWAYS A SCOUNDREL *by Barbara Anderson, illustrated by Dani.* It's eighteen years later and Han Solo is reunited with his Rebel friends, and he is presented with the surprise of a lifetime.

FOR THE LOVE OF A FRIEND *by J. A. Berger, illustrated by Dave Garcia.* Chewie returns to base in a damaged *Falcon* and without Han. Is Luke's use of the Force powerful enough to free Han from Vader's grasp?

HARRISON FORD FANS!

JUST PASSIN' THROUGH *by Barbara Anderson, illustrated by Dani.* When the ladies of the evening gather the next morning, their topic of conversation turns to the gentlemanly scoundrel, Tommy Lillard.

HOW HARD CAN IT BE? *by Martie Benedict and illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* This is the one you've all been waiting for. The tale of Indiana's 'misunderstanding' with the Sultan of Madagascar.

THE DOPPELGANGER *by Christine Jeffords, illustrated by Betsy Peed.* Conclusion. How much damage does Han Solo inflict on the Rebel Alliance due to the indoctrination by the Empire?

THE COWBOY AND THE CHRISTIANS *by Michelle Worley, illustrated by Dani.* Tommy Lillard rode into town and the citizens of Walnut Grove will never be quite the same.

LEGACIES, *Part 1* *by Pat Nussman and Liz Sharpe, illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* The war is over, the princess and pirate wed, but 'happily ever after' still seems far away. Outlawed by the new government because of her dark heritage, Leia must help her husband face newly-awakened powers he neither understands nor wants, powers that warn of danger to Leia's childhood mentor, General Roberryl Rieekan.

Additional contributions of art by Wanda Lybarger, Laura Virgil and Wendy Ikeguchi; vignettes by Joan Shumsky and Marcia Brin. Poetry by Jacqueline Taero, Martie Benedict, Elaine Christiani, Peggy Barilla, Tonya Cox, Barbara Brayton, and Ruth Radecki. Cartoons by Dave Garcia, Wanda Lybarger, Suzy Samson, Yvonne Zan, Peggy Dixon and Diane Pitman.

This issue contains 254 pages, offset printed and perfect bound. Cost is $13.00, plus $2.50 first class postage. Please make checks or money orders payable to FLIP OF A COIN and mail to:

FLIP OF A COIN
Paula Truelove & Jenny McAdams, Editors
502 McKeithan, #4A
Tallahassee, Florida 32304

Very few left!

FLIP OF A COIN 7

Once again, FLIP's ready with all new features on Harrison Ford's characters, including several on his latest, John Book. In addition read more exciting tales about Han Solo, Indiana Jones, David Halloran, Kenny Boyd, Rick Deckard, Tommy Lillard, and the Bellboy!

Features include:

LEGACIES *by Pat Nussman and Liz Sharpe; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Han and Leia launch a daring plan to rescue Ganeral Rieekan and his wife, Kayka Amnnssu, from the bloodthirsty sanarks, and attempt to bring about the downfall of Mon Mothma. Don't miss this exciting conclusion to the story started in FLIP #6!

TEA FOR ONE *by Barbara Anderson; illustrated by Martynn.* David Halloran, honorably discharged from the service for five years, newly married and beginning to settle down for a new life in Chicago, receives a letter from Paul Sellinger--with news of Margaret.

CAROL FOR A LONELY NIGHT *written and illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Han faces ghosts of his past, as well as a bounty hunter, when the *Falcon* is forced to land for repairs on Ord Mantell during the Corellian festival Turn of the Axis.

REUNION *by T. S. Weddell; illustrated by Barbara Frances-Simon.* Before accepting Indy's marriage proposal, Marion must take him home and face someone of her past.

MY TWO FRIENDS *by Sherry Magee; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* A delightful comparison by Samuel between his Amish and English friends, and the toys given to him by both.

BOOK THOUGHTS: STORM WITHOUT - STORM WITHIN *by Barbara Anderson; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* After spending the day working with the Amish constructing a barn, John Book sits in a porch swing reflecting on his satisfaction of a job well done--and his feelings for Rachel.

BLADE RUNNERS AREN'T SUPPOSED TO HAVE FEELINGS *by Ruth Radecki; illustrated by Barbara Frances-Simon.* After witnessing Batty's valiant battle for life, feelings are awakened in Deckard that he'd felt were long buried.

A MOMENT STOLEN *by Paula Truelove; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Han and Leia have a few tender moments before Vader seals Han's fate.

Harrison Ford Fans!

A PUMPKIN TALE *by Sherry Magee; illustrated by D. C. Wickes.* Kenny and Annie are back! Kenny spends the entire afternoon carving Jack O' Lanterns for Annie and Sandy, and all he wants in return is a homemade pumpkin pie...

IT'S NOT OVER YET *by Barbara Anderson; illustrated by Yvonne Zan.* A willing Imperial Colonel, ready to give vital information to the Rebels, may destroy Han's relationship with Leia, as well as the Rebellion.

TRANSITIONS *by Jacqueline Taero; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* It's after the Ewok celebration and Han, Leia and Luke contemplate their futures.

BELLBOY *by Cypher; illustrated by Dani.* He may have started as a fresh-faced bellboy, but his destiny took him West...

THE FINAL JUMP *by Kathi Barnes; illustrated by Dave Garcia.* Many years have passed since the Rebellion and Han finally joins his friends Chewie, Leia and Luke.

BOOK REVIEW: JOHN BOOK *by Barbara Anderson; illustrated by Dani.* The Bibliophilic Society's resident critic reviews the latest best-selling edition of John Book.

LEIA HAS THE LAST LAUGH *by Diane Pitman and Peggy Dixon; illustrated by Yvonne Zan.* Han hasn't felt at all well lately--tired, pale, prone to headaches, dizziness, and is developing strange cravings.

APOCALYPSE THEN *by Robin White; illustrated by Rebecca Carey.* A television station's helicopter makes an emergency landing on the Boyd farm which brings back haunting images of Kenny's reoccurring nightmares.

SPRING THAW *by Sally Syrjala; illustrated by Dani.* Maggie, visiting the cemetary, bitterly reflects that the war has taken far more from her than it ever gave...and then the sun begins to shine.

TURNING TIME *by Martie Benedict; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Sixteen pages of lyrics devoted to WITNESS, composed and written by Martie and accompanied by Wanda's stunning artwork.

Additional features include: poetry by Jacqueline Taero, Cypher, Ruth Radecki, Elaine Christiani, Linda Ruth Pfonner, and Donna Oakes; filks by Barbara Anderson, Marguerite O'Rourke and Phillis Milby; and cartoons by Martynn, Yvonne Zan, Sharon Palmer, and Suzy Sansom.

This issue contains 214 pages, offset printed and perfect bound; the cost is $12.75, plus $2.50 first class postage. Please make check or money order payable to FLIP OF A COIN and mail to:

FLIP OF A COIN
Paula Truelove & Jenny McAdams, Editors
502 McKeithan, #4A
Tallahassee, Florida 32304

P.S. With this issue, we are including an additional surprise!

FLIP OF A COIN

8

Hello! Issue 8 of FLIP is now available with a great variety of fiction, poetry, art, filks, and even a puzzle, featuring your favorite Harrison Ford characters! Selections include:

TERRA NOVA *by Cypher; illustrated by Jim Markle.* Han Solo captures a thought-to-be derelict ship and receives a whole lot more than he bargained for!

THE CRYSTAL SKULL *by Barbara Anderson; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* An exciting adventure in which Indiana Jones, after "borrowing" the Crystal Skull, travels to the Pusila temple to observe the Mayan worship of Ixchel, the moon goddess--only to become her next human sacrifice!

MAGGIE MAY *by Martie Benedict-O'Brien.* Deckard and Rachel have fled the city and are heading north when a startling realization forces him once again into a role from which he thought he had escaped.

THE CROSS-UNIVERSE "GET" STORY TO END THEM ALL *by Jacqueline Taero; illustrated by Dani.* Martin Stett hosts a party for Indiana Jones, Han Solo, Rick Deckard, Colonel Barnsby, Tommy Lillard, David Halloran, Kenny Boyd, Bob Falfa, Paul Winjam, Jake, Mr. Harrison, Willie Bill, et al. Guess who survives?

SHADOW DANCING *by Sally Syrjala; illustrated by J. Low.* While dancing with Rachel in the barn, John Book reflects on the differences in their lifestyles.

CHRISTMAS VIGNETTE, OR YOU WANT NORMAN ROCKWELL, WE GOT NORMAN ROCKWELL *by Sherry Magee; illustrated by Martynn.* Join Kenny and Annie on Christmas morning while they discover what delights are awaiting them under the tree.

LAST LAUGH *by Peggy Barilla; illustrated by Mary Platt.* Rachel was special; no termination date. In their many years together, the irony of that "specialness" would become painfully apparent.

PROTEGÉ *by Dani; illustrated by Jim Markle.* John Book has retired from the Philadelphia police force and is paid a visit by a young detective to whom for many years he had furnished moral support and advice--at the price of a great personal loss.

Harrison Ford Fans!

ESCAPE FROM NORWAY *by Barbara Anderson; illustrated by Karen River.* When faced with the choice of dinner with the Sellingers or another special mission for England, David Halloran chooses the latter and makes a discovery that begins to crumble the walls he had built to prevent himself from caring.

THE FINAL CALL *by Paula Truelove and Jenny McAdams; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Harry Caul finally succeeds in ending his torment at the hands of Martin Stett.

VIGNETTE IN SEARCH OF A STORY *by Jacqueline Taero.* After returning home from Washington, Indy takes Marion to pick up Short Round from school, all the while his mind is churning over the loss of the Ark--and searching for a way to recapture it. Jacqueline has set the stage and we're offering our readers the chance to develop the idea into a full story. A prize will be awarded to the winning author.

CHANGE OF MINDS *by Elaine Christiani; illustrated by Dani.* While in the plane after their hair-raising escape from the Club Obi-Wan, Indy and Willie reflect on each other's character.

MULTIPLE CHOICE *by Karen Ripley; illustrated by Dani.* A trio of possible endings for WITNESS as events might have happened either one year, one month, or one day later.

FAREWELL TO THE SEAGULLS *by Becky Cope; illustrated by Rebecca Carey.* Time is running out for Deckard and Rachel as he faces a terrifying reality.

RED *by Kathi Barnes; illustrated by Dani.* As Rachel sits sewing on her Tree of Life quilt, she remembers the significance of all the bits of cloth, and adds another to represent her love for John Book.

DOOMSDAY BOOK *by Martie Benedict-O'Brien; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Fourteen pages of lyrics inspired by INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM, composed by Martie and beautifully illustrated by Wanda.

This issue also includes: poetry by Cypher, Jacqueline Taero, Martie Benedict-O'Brien, Pat Nussman, Elaine Christiani, Tracy Taylor, Stacy Strey, Rebecca Carey, Pat Grant, and Tonya Cox; additional art by Karen River, Barbara Frances-Simon, Tina Mauldin, Pat Grant, and Tracy Taylor; and cartoons by Sharon Palmer, Elizabeth Warren, Cherie Fontyn, and Wanda Lybarger.

The price is $12.90, plus $2.50 for first class postage. Please make check or money order payable to FLIP OF A COIN and mail to:

FLIP OF A COIN
Paula Truelove and Jenny McAdams, Editors
502 McKeithan Street, #4A
Tallahassee, Florida 32304

FLIP OF A COIN 9

FLIP's back with 214 pages of all new selections of fiction, poetry, art, filks, and cartoons based on characters portrayed by Harrison Ford. Features in this issue include:

LITTLE ONE *by L. A. Adolf; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* The classic tale of how, after crash landing on Kashyyyk, Han is rescued and nursed back to health by a family of Wookiees, forming the bond between our two favorite smugglers.

THE BEST LAID PLANS . . . *by Barbara Anderson; illustrated by Mark Fisher.* Tommy, with a night of loving on his mind, instead finds himself rescuing a young girl from the cat house and returning her to her home, several days ride away. Upon arrival, Tommy's past finally catches up with him, making him vow to never pick up another stray.

PARADISE RUN *by Cypher; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* It was the time of Festival on Salos and with a purse of one hundred thousand credits, Han, who was broke as usual, decides to enter the treacherous Paradise Run, challenging the current Paradise King, F'aalfa of Klafawnya. Determined to make an unwilling Han famous, Jorj the Dreamweaver goes along for the ride.

THE LAMB AMONG THE GOATS *by Karen Ripley.* John Book, in the throes of the flu, is dragged out of bed to investigate the brutal murder of a vice squad detective. Befriending a principal suspect in the case shows him the futility of his life's work.

BESPIN PLEDGE *by Carolyn Golledge; illustrated by Dani.* After his session with the scan-grid on Bespin, Han and Leia face their feelings for each other. As she watches Han being put into carbon freeze, she vows to be the one who saves him.

Harrison Ford Fans!

FOR SMALL FAVORS . . . *by Peggy Barilla; illustrated by Jim Markle.* Kenny Boyd runs into an acquaintance on the way home from a trip to town and discovers that not everyone views him as an outsider.

KNIGHT'S GAME *by Pat Nussman and Jacqueline Taero; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Han awakens from carbon freeze to find himself on Dagobah where he reluctantly continues his training in the ways of the Force--so long ago abandoned--in order that he and Luke can rescue Leia from her path to the Dark Side.

REMEMBRANCE *by Sally Syrjala; illustrated by Dani.* On Endor, everyone is celebrating but Han is searching his inner self, remembering his last bitter days on Corell and the broken trusts. Despite his memories, he realizes that he is finally willing to make a commitment.

SCOTCH AND CHAMPAGNE *by Barbara Anderson; illustrated by J. A. Low.* All set for a night on the town in New York City, Indy and Marion run into a blond night-club singer, who happens to be Marion's best friend from high school. It's going to be a long night for Indy.

HUNT WITHOUT MOONLIGHT *by Linda Ruth Pfonner; illustrated by Melea Fisher.* An alternate ending to ROTJ. Luke and Chewie finally rescue Han from the clutches of Jabba the Hutt. On board the *Falcon*, Chewie helps Han recapture his memory which has eliminated all events beginning with their meeting of Obi-Way Kenobi and Luke Skywalker in the cantina.

THE QUEST FOR ASPARAGUS . . . *by Jenny McAdams; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* MOSQUITO COAST is filming in Rome, Georgia, and four fans make the trek with a star in their eyes and a Fox on their minds.

This issue also includes poetry by Jacqueline Taero, Cypher, Cathie Whitehead, Peggy Barilla, Stacey Strey, Elaine Christiani, Christine Haire, Jill Thomas, and Madge Longhurst. Additional art by Rebecca Carey, Martynn, Dianne Smith, Tracy Taylor, Julie Jones, and Tina Mauldin. Cartoons by Brad Morris, Susan Hall and Donna Oakes.

The price is $12.75 plus $2.50 first class postage. Please make check or money order payable to FLIP OF A COIN in the amount of $15.25 and mail to:

FLIP OF A COIN
Paula Truelove and Jenny McAdams, Editors
502 McKeithan Street, #4A
Tallahassee, Florida 32304

FLIP OF A COIN

10

FLIP is celebrating!

In honor of the tenth issue, we have 262 pages, offset printed and perfect bound, with two beautiful full-color covers by Wanda Lybarger and Martynn. A wide range of Harrison Ford's characters are represented, written and illustrated by some of your favorite authors and artists. Selections include:

A NEW MEANING *by Carolyn Golledge; illustrated by Dani.* In this novella-length feature, the events of WITNESS are explored and brought to a conclusion, including the investigation and trial of Schaeffer and his partners, the relationship between John and Rachel, and the decision John has to make for his future.

THE GOOD WOMAN *by Cypher; illustrated by Jim Markle.* Rosalie has successfully played matchmaker and Tommy is quite smitten with a "respectable woman." Even with her abundant charms, however, he finds that some days it just doesn't pay to get out of bed in the morning.

THE PURE FAITH *by T. S. Weddell; illustrated by Dani.* During his summer break, a young, idealogical Indiana Jones has accepted an assistant's position on a pre-Columbian dig in South America where he is taught a lesson in the ethics of the archeological profession.

REVELATION *by Irina Ozernoy; illustrated by Jim Markle.* Mark Blackwood, trying to understand his mother's reasoning in turning over the control of the family business to Uncle Matt, overhears a disturbing conversation which provides new insight into the circumstances of the elder Blackwood's death.

COMING TO *by Elaine Christiani; illustrated by Julie Jones.* Awakening in a strange bed, and in a strange house, but with a beautiful "guardian angel" by his side, John Book reflects on the events of the past few days--and Rachel.

Harrison Ford Fans!

TRIPPING THE LIGHT FANTASTIC *by Barbara Anderson; illustrated by Jim Markle.* Another one of 'The Classics.' On a routine haul to Pelaro III, Han Solo is set up for a kill by Big Bunji and the ruthless reptilian slaver, Zira. A beautiful slave girl foils their plan but will she and Han survive to tell the tale?

LUCK *by Karen Ripley; illustrated by L. Rogan.* A mellow old sheriff is torn between the moral and legal consequences concerning the welfare of his young prisoner.

THE DAY OF THE GLADIUS *by Robin White; illustrated by Jim Markle.* Instead of attending a lecture given by Rene Belloq at the Royal Archeological Society, Indy decides to pay a visit to the England countryside. He never dreamed his visit would involve a journey back in time to meet a famous outlaw who robs from the rich and gives to the poor.

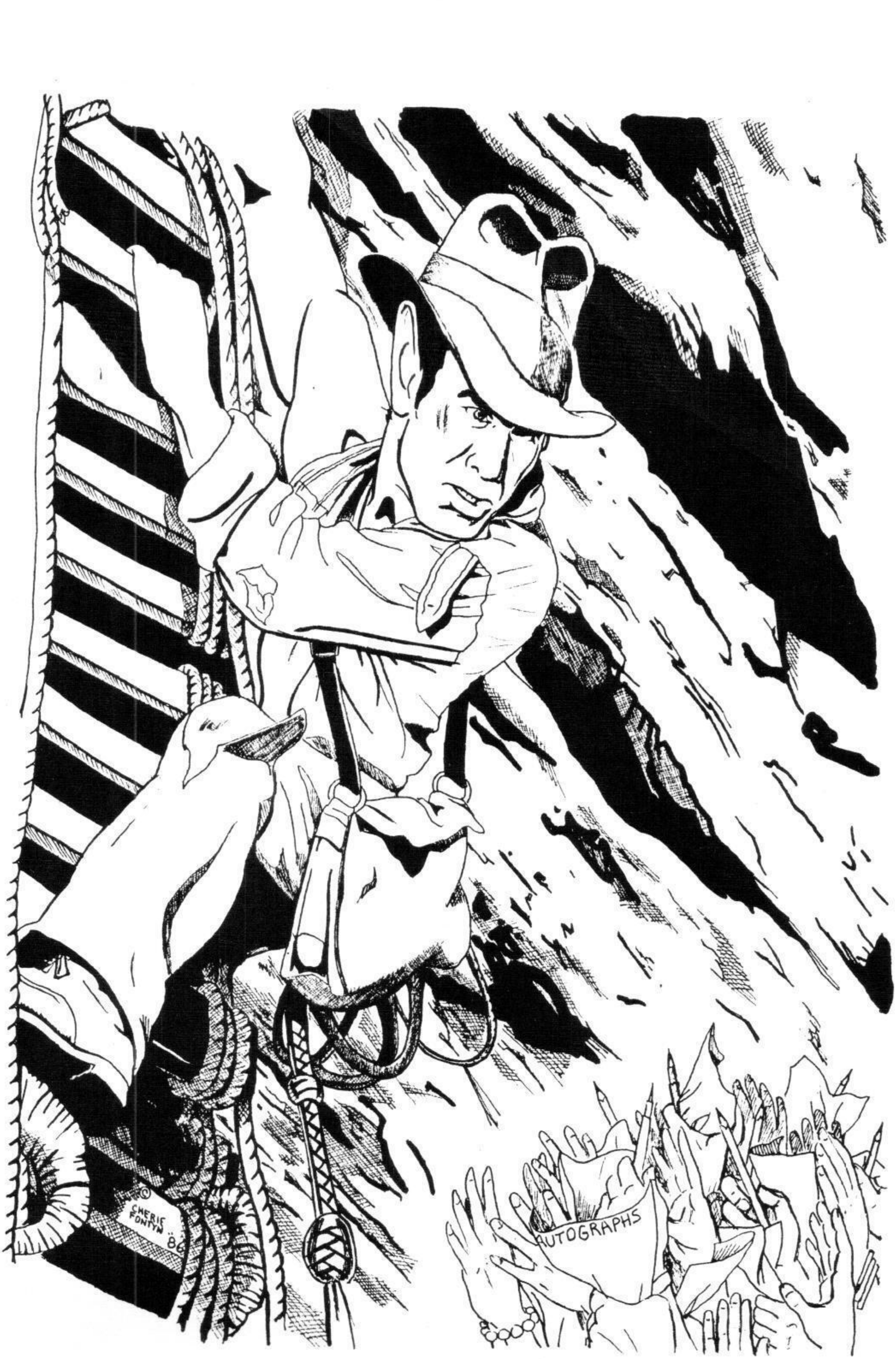
MEDICINE SHOW *by Cypher; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger.* Chewie has become a shed-out Wookiee, afflicted with a severe case of Mazerrian mange, for which there is no known cure. In desperation, Han seeks the services of a travelling quack, Miracle, captain of the *Panacea*, and finds instead Nova and her obnoxious co-pilot fungus, Phloth. Follow their adventures as they race across the universe in search of a cure, all the while (as if they didn't have enough problems) barely keeping one jump ahead of a persistent skip-tracer.

SOMEWHERE IN KANSAS *by Elaine Christiani; illustrated by Jim Markle.* While paying a visit to the Blue Lily saloon in Cherryvale, Kansas, Tommy falls for the charms of the reputed psychic Kate Bender, who invites him home--for a visit he'll likely not ever forget.

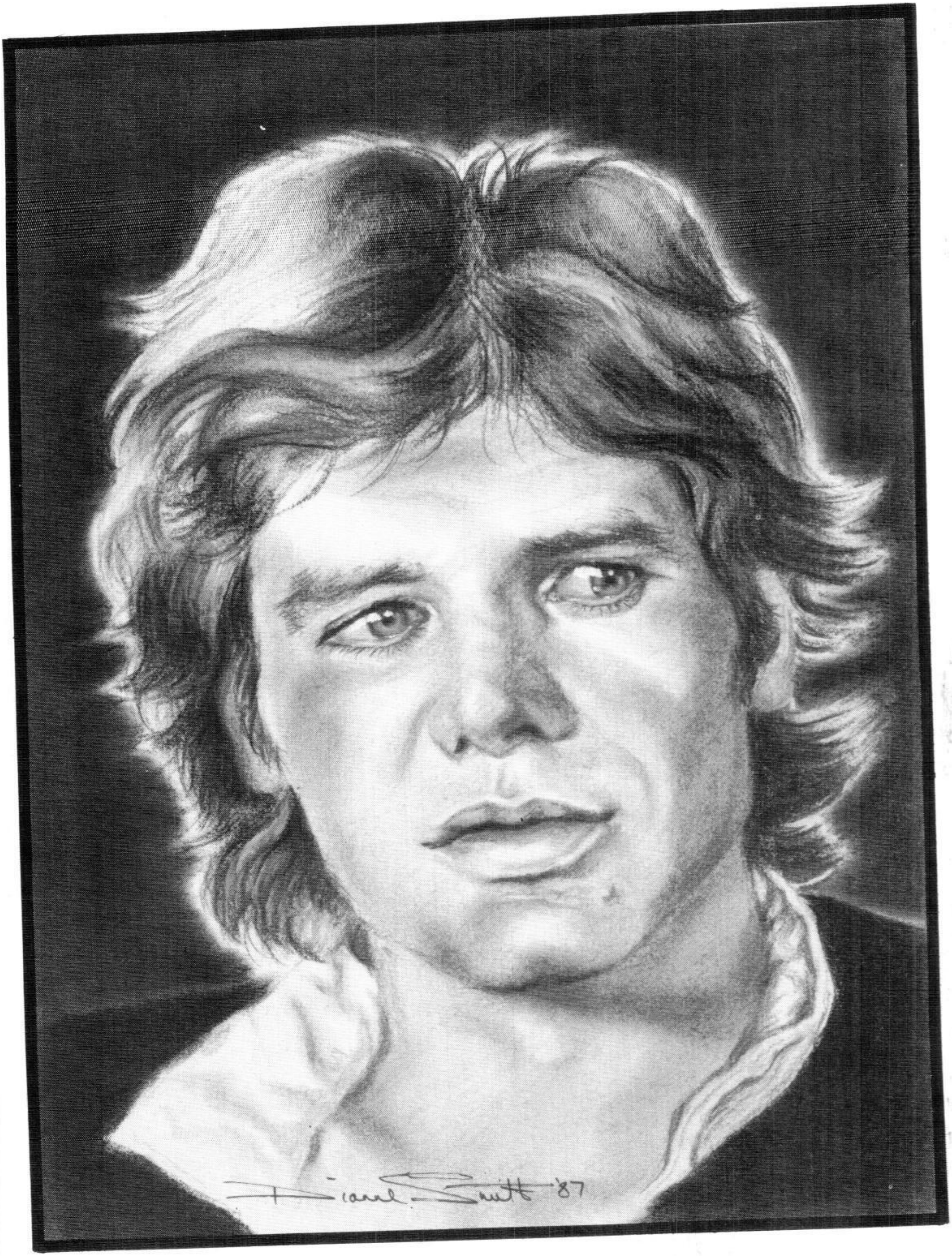
This issue also includes poetry by Jacqueline Taero, Martie O'Brien, Cypher, Ruth Radecki, Pat Nussman, Jill Thomas, Rebecca Toon and Irina Ozernoy, Kathryn Agel, and Elaine Christiani; filks by Ann Morris, Adrain Barton, and Mike Geraghty, Christine Haire, Jeanna Falk, and Marguerite O'Rourke; additional art by Sharon Palmer, Wanda Lybarger, Julie B. Jones, Nancy Miller, Suzy Sansom, Dianne Smith, Cherie Fontyn, and Yvonne Zan. Also, cartoons by Jim Markle and Sharon Palmer.

The price is $15.00 plus $2.50 first class postage. Please make check or money order payable to FLIP OF A COIN in the amount of $17.50 and mail to:

FLIP OF A COIN
Paula Truelove and Jenny McAdams, Editors
502 McKeithan Street, #4A
Tallahassee, Florida 32304



© CHERIE FONTYN 86
AUTOGRAPHS


Diane Smith '87